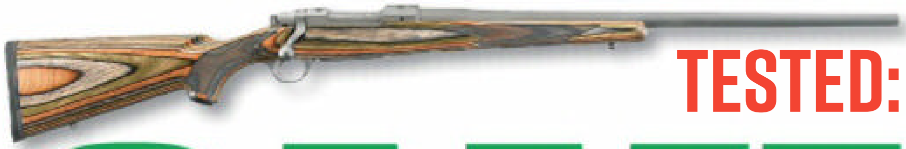

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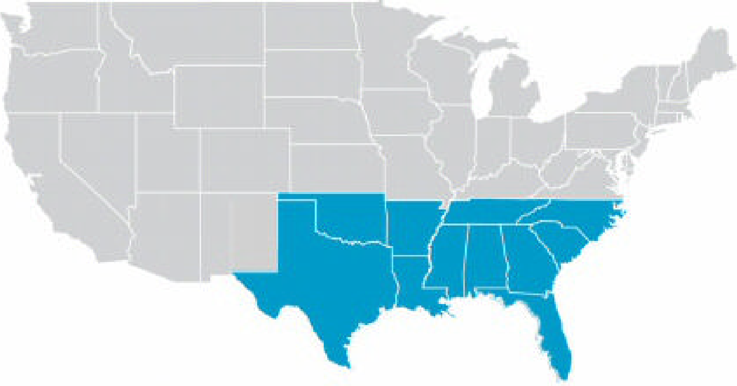

REGIONAL EDITOR: Dr. Todd A. Kuhn, Todd.Kuhn@OutdoorSG.com | **COVER IMAGE:** Drew Rogowski Image | @GAMEANDFISHMAG | FACEBOOK.COM/GAMEANDFISH

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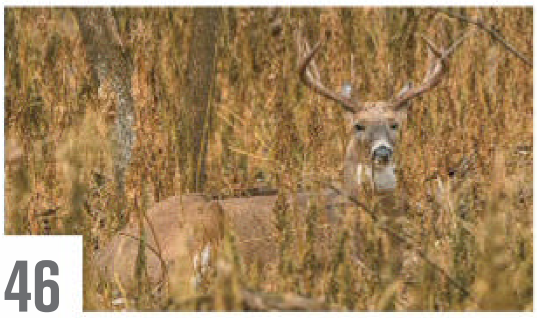

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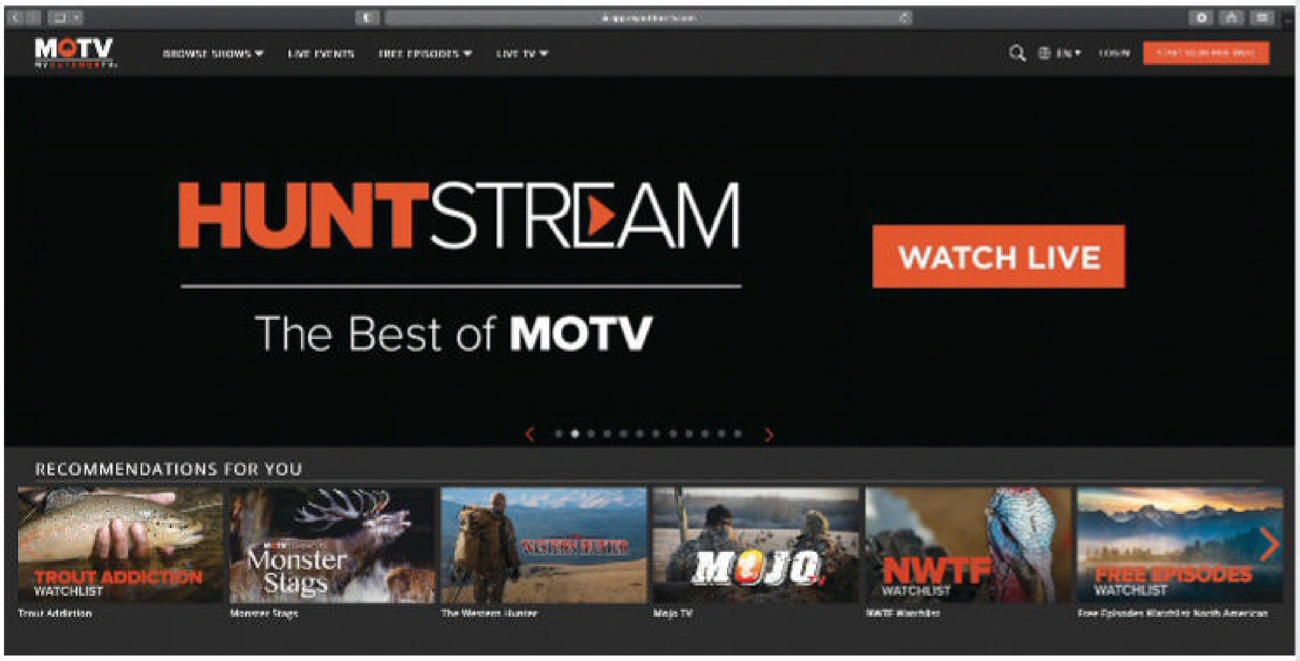
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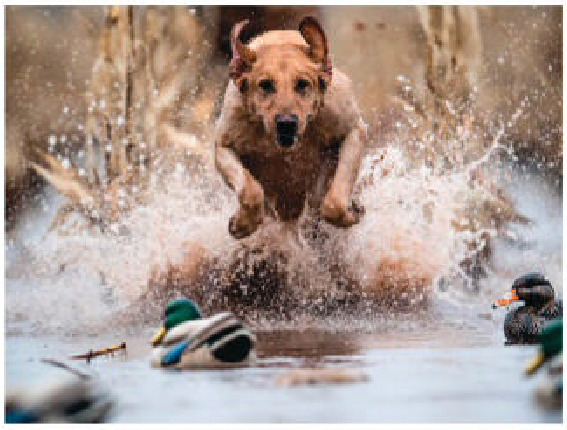
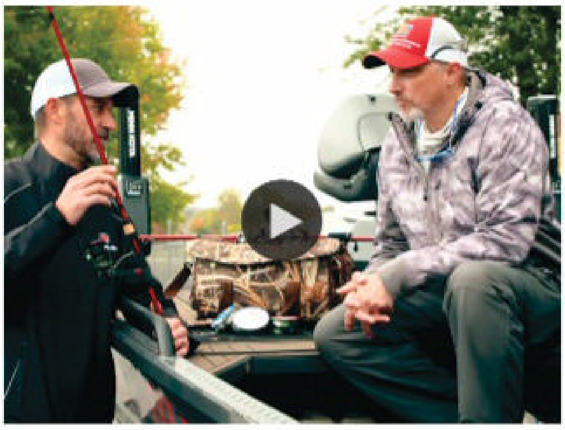


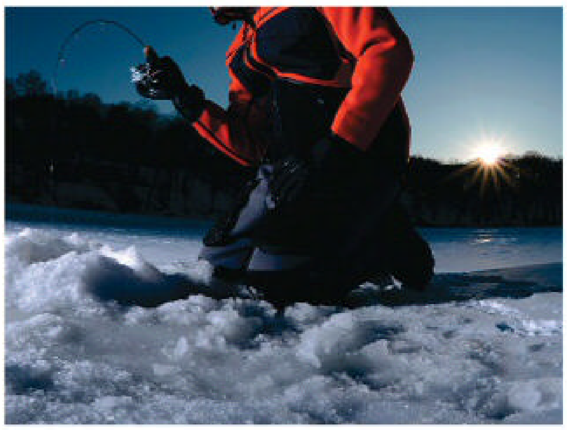
FLOCK KNOWLEDGE

Waterfowl hunting is in full swing nationwide, and we have the info you need to bag a limit. Pull down the "Hunting" menu to "Waterfowl" for advice.



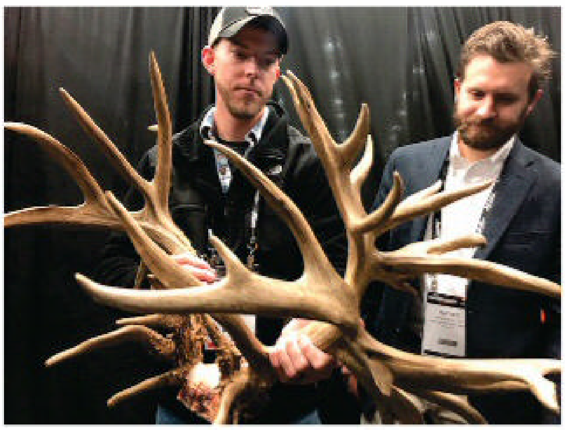
BINGE ON BASS

Take a winter break from bass fishing, and learn with "Beyond the Bait," a two-season, 25-episode series on everything bass. Find it under "Watch."



NICE FOR THE ICE

Advancements in rods, reels and electronics have made ice fishing much more effective. Read "Best Ice Fishing Gear 2022" to see the "coolest" new stuff.



BEHEMOTH BUCK STORY

Hunters continue to be drawn to Luke Brewster's 320-inch-plus buck shot in 2018. Read why at "The Story Behind Brewster's World-Record Buck."

COURTESY OF JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY (TOP RIGHT); COURTESY OF EUKANUBA (MIDDLE LEFT); SHUTTERSTOCK (BOTTOM LEFT); JEFF PHILLIPS (BOTTOM RIGHT)

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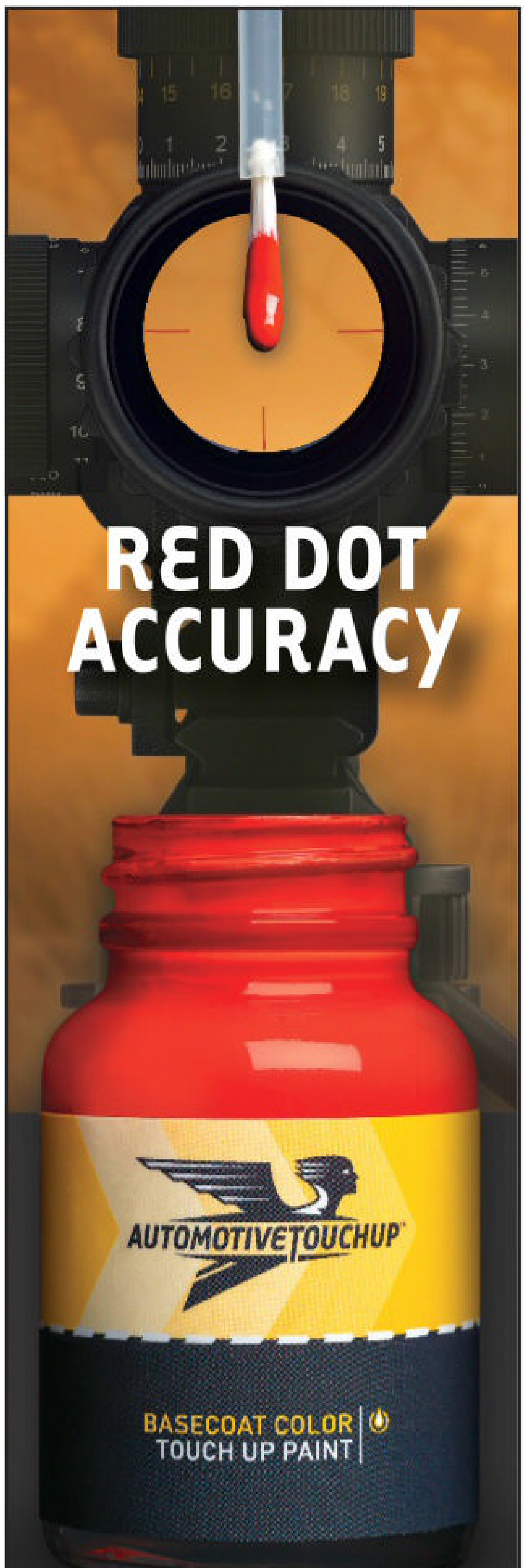

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			1 am 9:06 to 11:06 pm 9:30 to 11:30	🟧 2 am 9:54 to 11:54 pm 10:18 to 12:18	🟧 3 am 10:18 to 12:18 pm 10:42 to 12:42	🟧 4 am 10:42 to 12:42 pm 11:06 to 1:06
🟧 5 NEW am — to — pm 12:42 to 2:42	🟧 6 am 1:06 to 3:06 pm 1:30 to 3:30	🟧 7 am 1:54 to 3:54 pm 2:18 to 4:18	🟧 8 am 2:42 to 4:42 pm 3:06 to 5:06	9 am 3:30 to 5:30 pm 3:54 to 5:54	10 am 4:18 to 6:18 pm 4:42 to 6:42	11 am 5:06 to 7:06 pm 5:30 to 7:30
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JANUARY 2022

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
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9 am 5:06 to 7:06 pm 5:30 to 7:30	🟦 10 FIRST Q am 5:54 to 7:54 pm 6:18 to 8:18	11 am 6:42 to 8:42 pm 7:06 to 9:06	12 am 7:30 to 9:30 pm 7:54 to 9:54	13 am 8:18 to 10:18 pm 8:42 to 10:42	🟩 14 am 9:06 to 11:06 pm 9:30 to 11:30	🟩 15 am 9:54 to 11:54 pm 10:18 to 12:18
🟩 16 am 10:18 to 12:18 pm 10:42 to 12:42	🟩 17 FULL am 10:42 to 12:42 pm 11:06 to 1:06	🟩 18 am — to — pm 12:42 to 2:42	🟩 19 am 1:06 to 3:06 pm 1:30 to 3:30	🟩 20 am 1:54 to 3:54 pm 2:18 to 4:18	21 am 2:42 to 4:42 pm 3:06 to 5:06	22 am 3:30 to 5:30 pm 3:54 to 5:54
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🟧 30 am 9:54 to 11:54 pm 10:18 to 12:18	🟧 31 am 10:18 to 12:18 pm 10:42 to 12:42					

The moon's phases are listed as New, First Quarter (First Q), Full and Last Quarter (Last Q). Times listed represent the peak activity times for game and fish each day.

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🟩 GOOD DAYS
🟦 FAIR DAYS

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THE 6 MM STORY

DUAL-PURPOSE VERSATILITY

MAKES 6 MM RIFLE CARTRIDGES, BOTH OLD AND NEW, WORTHY IN THE FIELD.

By Richard Mann

inch/mm
6.1
mm
OFF
ON
ZERO

The metric equivalent of .243 inch is 6.172 mm, but Remington rounded down when in 1963 it named the 6 mm Rem. cartridge.

ADAM HEGGENSTALLER

Although .30-caliber cartridges are perennial favorites and 6.5 mm rounds now get a lot of attention, cartridges that fire 6 mm bullets are ideal for many American hunters. They offer low recoil and flat trajectories for varmint and predator hunting, and they have enough punch for deer-sized game. This dual suitability has been a defining characteristic of 6 mm rifle cartridges, and they can even be effective on larger game if partitioned, bonded or monometal bullets are used. (In 2014 my wife used a .243 Win. to take a gemsbok and wildebeest in Africa with one well-placed shot each.) Let's look at the progress of 6 mm rifle cartridges, which continues today for good reason.

In 1955 Remington introduced the .244 Rem. cartridge. It was based on the .257 Roberts, which was a .25-caliber cartridge derived from the 7x57 mm Mauser. The .244 Rem. utilized a bullet with a diameter of .243 inch, which equates to 6.172 mm, and had a land-to-land bore diameter of .237 inch. Suitable for varmints with lightweight 75-grain bullets and deer-sized game with 90-grain bullets, the .244 Rem. would become one of the first commercially successful 6 mm cartridges in America.

But Remington made a mistake with the .244. Originally, the company specified a rifling twist rate of one turn in 12 inches. This limited the cartridge's ability to stabilize longer, heavier bullets. In 1963 Remington renamed the .244 Rem. the 6 mm Rem. and introduced it in the new Model 700 bolt-action rifle with a 1-in-9-inch twist rate. However, it was too late. Also in 1955, Winchester had introduced the ballistically similar .243 Win. It was based on the .308 Win. case and used the same diameter bullet as the .244 Rem. But Winchester was smarter with its introduction; the company chose a 1-in-10 twist rate that would stabilize heavier bullets.

The .243 Win. quickly became a favorite of hunters who wanted one rifle they could use for groundhogs, rock chucks, coyotes, and deer- or pronghorn-sized big game. It became known as a both-ways (varmint/big-game) cartridge. Shortly after its introduction, the .243 Win. earned a spot in the top 10 best-selling rifle cartridges and has remained there ever since. The first deer rifle my father ever purchased was a .243 Win., and I watched him use it with great success on groundhogs and deer for more than 40 years.

Weatherby recognized the popularity of the .243 and in 1968 introduced the .240 Wby. Mag. It was the last cartridge designed by Roy Weatherby and could push a 60-grain bullet to 3,800 fps and a 100-grain bullet to 3,300 fps. It had a velocity advantage over the 6 mm Rem. and the .243 Win., and it filled the same niche. The .240 Wby. Mag. is still with us—Weatherby offers factory ammo and rifles for it—but like many Weatherby cartridges, it never achieved mass appeal.

In 2003 Winchester introduced another 6 mm called the .243 WSSM (Winchester Super Short Magnum). It had a shorter overall length than any previous 6 mm—the same as the .223 Rem.—but was much fatter. The base of the .243 WSSM cartridge measured .555 inch in diameter as compared to .471 inch for the .243 Win. Essentially a ballistic twin to the .243 Win., it enjoyed an initial flurry of fanfare and storm of popularity. However, the .243 WSSM faded away just as quickly as it arrived. It could not dethrone Winchester's older 6 mm.

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6 MM EXTERNAL BALLISTICS

CARTRIDGE	BULLET WEIGHT	BALLISTIC COEFFICIENT	MUZZLE VELOCITY	300-YARD VELOCITY	300-YARD DROP	600-YARD VELOCITY	600-YARD DROP
6 mm Rem.	95	.355	3,235	2,445	-9.81	1,782	-72.37
.243 Win.	90	.409	3,150	2,469	-10.08	1,883	-71.38
.240 Wby. Mag.	90	.376	3,320	2,557	-8.50	1,910	-65.76
.243 WSSM	95	.379	3,150	2,419	-10.30	1,779	-74.29
6 mm Creedmoor	103	.512	3,050	2,510	-10.34	2,090	-69.70
6 mm ARC	103	.512	2,800	2,288	-12.93	1,833	-85.27

Data represents the flattest-shooting big-game factory loads for each cartridge, using factory-advertised velocities and ballistic coefficients. Data was calculated at sea level with a temperature of 59 degrees, barometric pressure of 29.92 inHg and 50 percent relative humidity. Bullet weight measured in grains. Velocities measured in fps. Bullet drops based on a 100-yard zero.

PRECISION HUNTER
Hornady
PRECISION HUNTER
6mm ARC
103 gr ELD-X®

The defining traits of the 6 mm ARC are its ability to function in the AR-15 and its use of bullets with high ballistic coefficients.

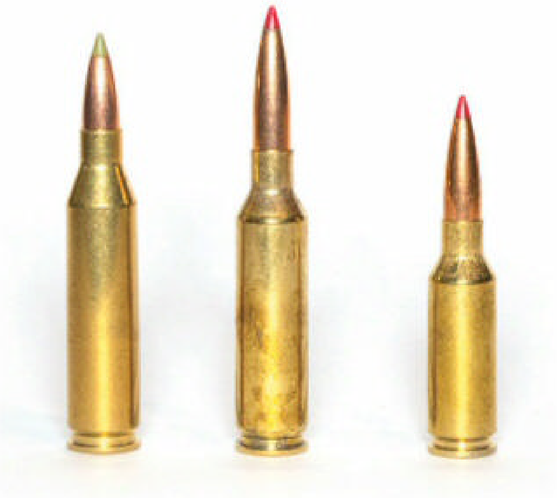
Though it had been a wildcat cartridge since 2009, Hornady legitimized the 6 mm Creedmoor in 2017. It's essentially a 6.5 Creedmoor necked down to 6 mm. With a specified twist rate of 1 turn in 7.5 inches and a case slightly shorter than the .243 Win., the 6 mm Creedmoor can utilize longer, sleeker bullets and still work in short-action rifles. The 6 mm Creedmoor and .243 Win. are very close in ballistic performance. However, the 6 mm Creedmoor's compatibility with bullets having high ballistic coefficients allows it to perform better at extreme distances. For shooting game at typical ranges, the 6 mm Creedmoor offers no practical advantage over the .243 Win.

On the other hand, the new 6 mm ARC (Advanced Rifle Cartridge) does. The 6 mm ARC is based on the 6.5 Grendel (which has the 7.62x39 mm as its parent). Because of its shorter overall length, the 6 mm ARC works well in the AR-15 platform something no previous 6 mm cartridge could do. Like with the 6 mm Creedmoor, the fast 1-in-7.5 twist rate of the 6 mm ARC also permits the use of bullets with high ballistic coefficients. This gives hunters who like the varmint/big-game capability that 6 mm cartridges offer the option to use an AR-15. (The AR-15 platform can be made to work with the .243 WSSM, but the configuration never became commercially viable.)

If you want to hunt with an AR-15, the 6 mm ARC is the way to go. It might be the best dual-purpose varmint/deer cartridge yet for that platform. If you want to ring steel out past 500 yards, as well as hunt deer and vermin at more sensible distances, the 6 mm Creedmoor will do both jobs admirably. The 6 mm Rem. and .243 WSSM are dead, and the .240 Wby. Mag. never gained a huge following. If you own rifles for any of these, don't fret. They're all excellent; you will just likely struggle to find factory ammo.

The .243 Win. is still the king of 6 mm cartridges. I've effectively used it across the United States and in Africa. It's not the fastest or flattest-shooting 6 mm, and it's not AR compatible. But it has been proven and offers a great balance of everything that makes a 6 mm rifle cartridge worth considering in the first place. G&A

With 85- to 100-grain bullets, the .243 Win. is an excellent whitetail cartridge. Lighter bullets make it suitable for predators.



More than six decades of cartridge development separate the venerable .243 Win. (left) from the recently introduced 6 mm Creedmoor (center) and 6 mm ARC.

RICHARD MANN (3)

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TALKING TRENDS

CONSIDER **THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY** TO BECOME A BETTER BOWHUNTER.

By Tony Hansen

With another bow season soon to wrap up, it's time to take a look at the season that was ... and the ones that will be. One of the parts I enjoy about bowhunting is the constant evolution of the game. I like to learn and consider myself to be a lifetime learner. I make plenty of mistakes every season and try to learn from them. I'm always interested in new technologies, patterns or tactics that can help me see more deer in the woods. Some of these advancements don't always live up to the hype. Others have turned out to be incredible additions to the hunting experience.

I find it worthwhile to pay attention to trends because I might learn something. There were several that dominated the 2021 season, a few that might continue to have an impact in seasons to come, and one that I hope will die a silent death.

MOBILE HUNTING

The mobile hunting movement continued to roll in 2021, and I don't see much sign of it stopping. This is one trend I'm on the fence about. While the strategy is solid, its execution takes more care than many hunters realize.

The concept is pretty simple: Carry as little gear as possible and don't hit the woods with a pre-set plan laid in stone. Instead, react to the conditions and the hottest sign. If that means hunting from the ground, so be it. If an elevated position is beneficial, then use a saddle setup to minimize prep time.

Nothing wrong with any of this. In a lot of ways, it's something I've incorporated into my own bowhunting efforts for a long time, albeit without the use of a saddle. I've long favored light, portable stands and never married myself to a particular tree or location. If the deer tell me to move, I move. But I do it carefully, based on observation and known patterns. Mobile hunting shouldn't be random, but it sometimes seems to be done that way.

I don't see this trend going anywhere any time soon. In fact, I think we're likely just on the edge of the boom in gear specific to this approach.

We've already seen a number of new saddle offerings hit the market, and a couple of smaller treestand manufacturers have popped up with uber-light (and uber-pricey) stands designed specifically for the mobile run-and-gun game.

Climbing sticks are getting lighter, smaller and, yes, more expensive as well. We should see more packs designed specifically for mobile hunting setups, more mobile-related accessories and a continued focus on tactics related to this trend.

HEAVIER ARROW SETUPS

This trend has taken center stage over the past couple of seasons, and I've been a fan of it for some time. Heavier arrows fly better. They penetrate better. They tune easier.

Previously, we were somewhat limited on options for creating a heavier hunting arrow. Most arrow shafts were made for speed and thus were lighter. Broadheads were pretty much stagnant at 100-grain models.

Now we have a number of new shaft options that are designed specifically

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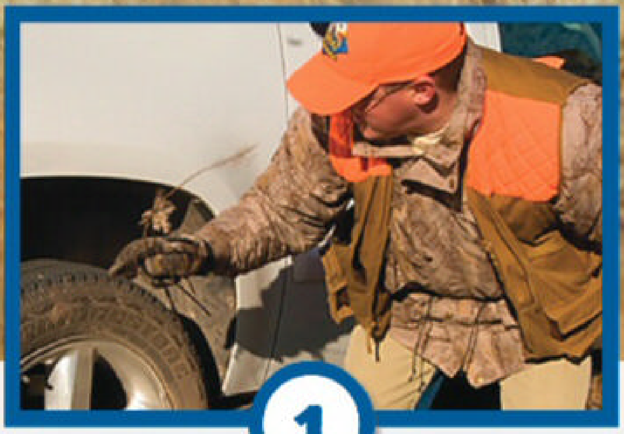
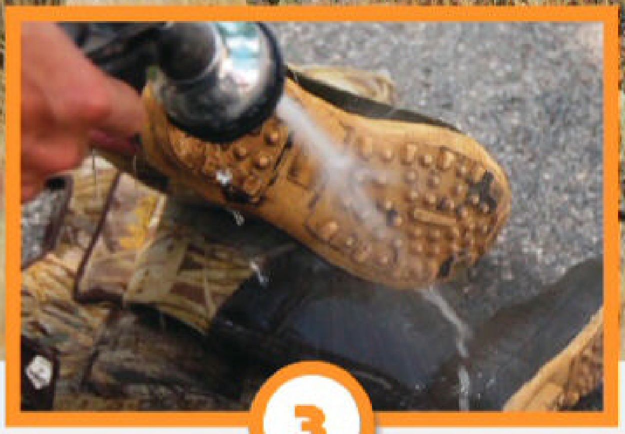


1

Clean all plants, mud and debris from trucks, trailers, gear and pets.

2

Drain all water from boats and recreational vehicles.



3

Dry boots/waders and all equipment for at least 5 days.

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The handle is made from genuine natural bone, and features decorative wood spacers and a hand-carved motif of two overlapping feathers— a reminder for you to respect and connect with the natural world.

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for heavier overall arrow weight and increased front-of-center configurations. Broadheads are also following suit. We've seen an influx of 125-grain heads hit the market as well as a number of 150-grain-plus options. I expect to see more heavy shafts, and broadheads at or above 125 grains, at the Archery Trade Association show when companies unveil their 2022 lineups.

BETTER BUDGET BOWS

Several bow manufacturers released models starting around 2019 that were friendlier on the wallet. From Bear and Xpedition to Hoyt and Mathews, top-end brands unveiled bows priced several hundred dollars below their flagship models. I hope this is a trend in the making.

I'm fortunate that I don't usually have to buy a bow. One of the perks of my outdoor-media gig is field-testing new bows on loan on an annual basis. But there was a time when I simply couldn't fathom spending more than $1,000 on a new bow, and that doesn't factor in accessories and arrows. I bet there are far more bowhunters in that position than there are ones who don't blink an eye when dropping a grand on a bow.

With today's technology and systems, clearly a top-quality bow can be built with a lower price tag. Maybe it doesn't have every bell and whistle, but it will still be a great shooter.

SOCIAL-MEDIA SHAMING

I'll wrap this up with one trend that none of us should be proud of. The social-media circus continued this season. Whether it was attacking someone for killing a buck that "looked like" it came from a deer farm or smashing on the parent of an 8-year-old boy who killed a giant buck during youth season, the keyboard cowboys were out in force.

To this I say: Enough. I could go on a rant about how we're all hunters and we're supposed to stick together. But I won't even go there. Instead, I'll go at it on a more basic level, and you don't have to be religious to see the wisdom.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandent is, He didn't mince words. He gave two simple directives: Love God. Love each other. Here's hoping next bow season we all see a bit more of that attitude when checking our social-media feeds.

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SPEAK UP FOR WILDLIFE

FISH AND GAME **MANAGEMENT ONLY WORKS WHEN WE FULLY PARTICIPATE** IN SHAPING REGULATIONS AND SEASONS.

By Andrew McKean

I once threw a party and no one came.

I had reserved a banquet room with seating for 50. I had bought cookies and perked coffee. I had sent out invitations far and wide in my role at the time as information officer for Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks. But besides me and a half-dozen of my colleagues, only two guests came to the party, which was a biennial season-setting meeting for my region of the state, the opportunity for the public to comment on proposed regulations for deer, elk, pheasant and turkey seasons.

One guest mistook my meeting for a book club. The other wanted to know why game wardens had ticketed his son, and few of his comments were useful, or even printable in a family magazine.

WORTHY OF CELEBRATION

SCI International Hunters' Convention lauds 50 years of hunting advocacy.

Meetings of state wildlife agencies aren't the only places to express your thoughts, and hear perspectives from other hunters, regarding game management and hunting regulations. If you're interested in furthering the connection between hunting and wildlife conservation on both a national and global scale, make plans to attend the International Hunters' Convention hosted by Safari Club International (SCI) in Las Vegas, Nev., Jan. 19 to 22.

The convention, which will feature more than 1,000 exhibitors and guest speakers such as Tucker Carlson and Donald Trump Jr., will celebrate SCI's 50 years of defending the freedom to hunt and supporting wildlife conservation worldwide. The Mandalay Bay Convention Center will host the events, which also include informative seminars as well as special auctions to support hunter advocacy and the SCI Foundation's conservation and education programs. For more information and to register, visit showsci.org.

–Game & Fish Staff

TOSH BROWN

I'm guessing that if you've been hunting and fishing long enough, you've been to at least one of these meetings. They're a chance for biologists to explain fish and wildlife trends, to propose changes to the way fish and game populations are managed, and then to get feedback from the very people who participate in fishing and hunting.

I'm also guessing that you've seen the sort of sparse turnout I described. In fact, it's a national trend. Hunters and anglers have a number of reasons why they don't participate in these meetings, but when state agencies make decisions that the public doesn't support, critics come out of the woodwork. That discontent is actually a good thing, because it's an indication that the public cares about wildlife management and finds ways to make their voices heard. That's the North American model of wildlife conservation in action. Public input into hunting and fishing regulations, season structures, and even what species can be pursued is the very foundation of our citizen-based model.

We agreed a long time ago that our wildlife would be owned by no one and everyone at the same time, and this public resource should be equitably distributed. This is the essence of what's called the "public-trust doctrine," and it's the mechanism that we've used to recover populations of depleted fish and game. It's why we have licenses, bag limits and seasons that we agree are in the best interests of the fish and game.

We asked state wildlife agencies to be the "trustees" of this resource, and to use science—instead of politics or emotion—to guide their management decisions. Hunters and anglers (and also trappers, wildlife watchers and landowners) are the beneficiaries of this public trust. Wildlife agencies work for us beneficiaries on behalf of America's fish and game.

We are obligated to hold up our end of the bargain: to speak up when asked. Every state agency has some opportunity for public comment. Find it and use it. If you don't speak up, then you can't blame agencies for their decisions. But if you do speak up, then you've cast your vote not only for your opinion and perspective, but for the public resource at the center of the conversation, the fish and game that don't have a voice.

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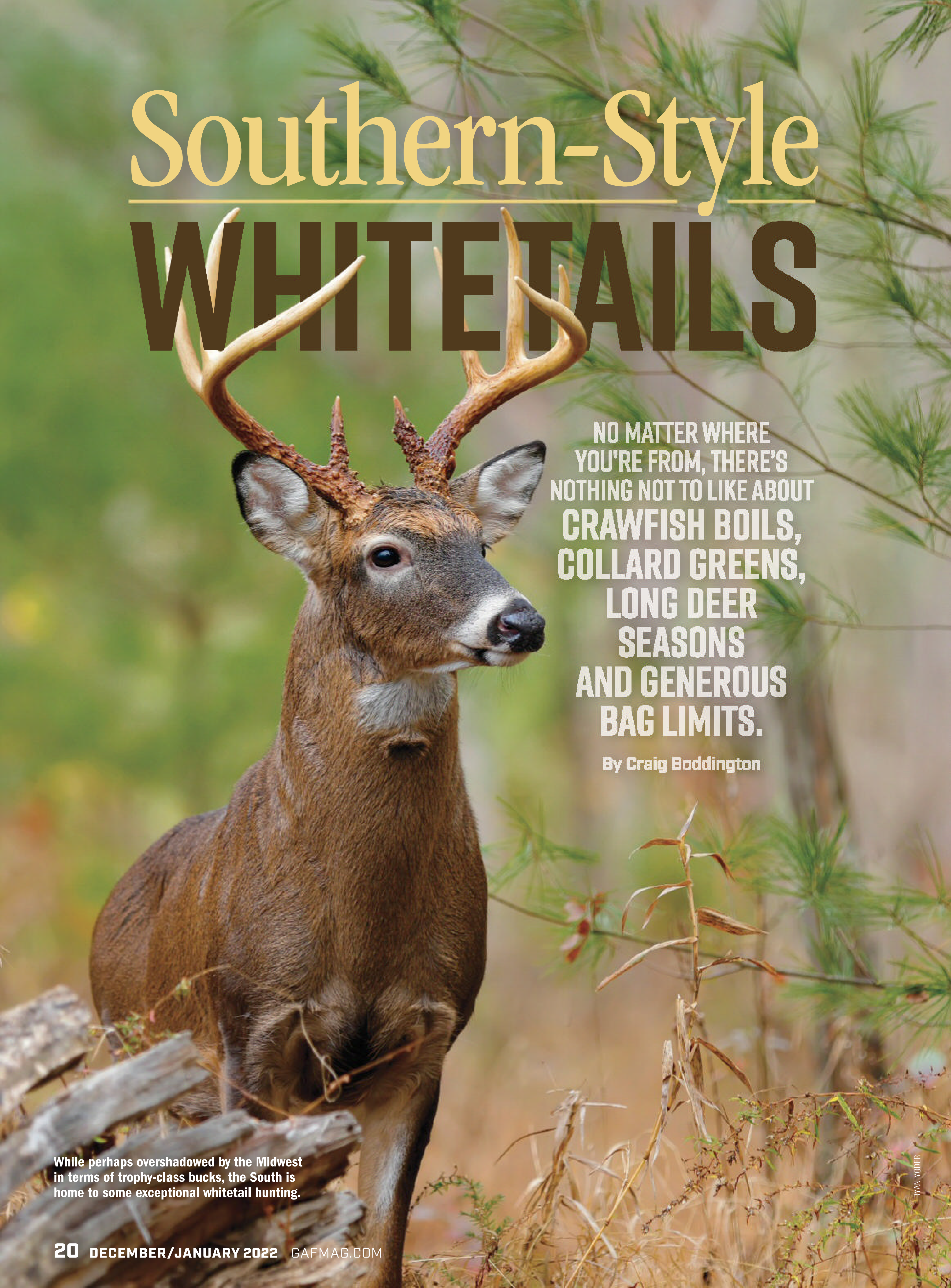
Southern-Style WHITETAILS

NO MATTER WHERE YOU'RE FROM, THERE'S NOTHING NOT TO LIKE ABOUT CRAWFISH BOILS, COLLARD GREENS, LONG DEER SEASONS AND GENEROUS BAG LIMITS.

By Craig Boddington



While perhaps overshadowed by the Midwest in terms of trophy-class bucks, the South is home to some exceptional whitetail hunting.

RYAN YODER

Regardless of how folks below the Mason-Dixon line view me, I'm not a Yankee. I'm from Bloody Kansas, a border state in my great-grandfather's war. Though I was a boy at the time, I clearly remember the headline when the last-known Civil War veteran passed in 1959.

Back then we had almost no deer in Kansas, and no deer season, but in my lifetime the Sunflower State has developed great whitetail hunting. It is not true that Kansas has a Boone and Crockett buck behind every tree, but we have good deer and a lot of bucks. I've always considered Kansas home, and for the last 15 years we've had a farm there.

Kansas rifle season is the only inviolable block on my calendar, but there are some problems. While archery season is generous, rifle season runs 12 days and starts the Wednesday after Thanksgiving. Plus, Kansas is a one-buck state. As a hunter, I support this rule; it creates good age-class distribution and a high buck-to-doe ratio. As a landowner, I hate it. We cannot remove bucks with poor genetics except by sacrificing that one buck tag.

So, from a time when I had no local deer hunting until today, when our Kansas buck hunting is exceptional but limited, I have always looked to the Deep South, where seasons are long and limits laughable. I hunted Alabama and the South Carolina low country when "one buck per day" or "no limit on bucks" was the regulation. Mind you, I'm talking whitetail deer! I suspect the game departments always knew the odds were in the deer's favor.

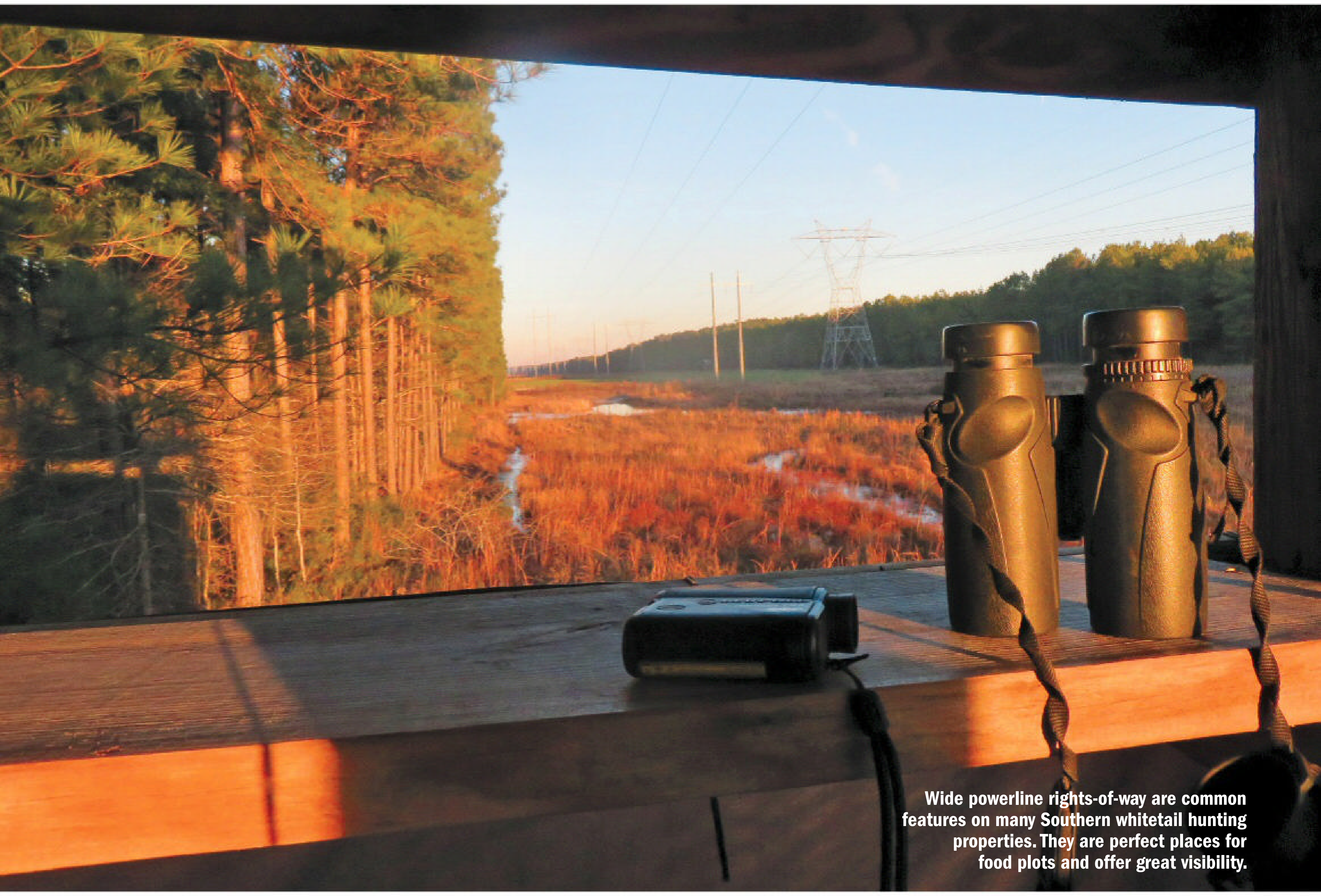
LIMITING OUT

I'm not sure where the Deep South really starts, but over 50 years I've hunted in both Carolinas, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia and Mississippi. Hailing from a one-buck state, I love going into a Southern hunt knowing I can take a buck … and then keep looking.

Usually this doesn't come to fruition. Although the whitetail is the most numerous big-game animal on the planet, it's also the wariest, wiliest and most hunter-educated. I've taken multiple does when meat was wanted or herd reduction needed, but I can recall only a couple times when I've taken more than one buck on a Southern whitetail hunt and numerous times when I never pressed the trigger. Even so, for a kid who grew up with no deer season, it's

CRAIG BODDINGTON

Roadways and narrow lanes through the piney woods of the Deep South offer hunters fleeting shot opportunities at deer on the move.



Wide powerline rights-of-way are common features on many Southern whitetail hunting properties. They are perfect places for food plots and offer great visibility.

a wonderful feeling to start a hunt with the world as my oyster. Reality or results don't matter; the potential is awesome.

Years back, I was hunting on buddy Zack Aultman's place in southern Georgia. Zack's only rule is to shoot mature bucks. My first time there, I made a horrible mistake and shot a gorgeous young 11-pointer that needed to grow up. As humans and hunters, we make mistakes, but that was one of the worst.

I didn't expect to be invited back but, surprisingly, I was. Next time, I never saw a decent buck (not uncommon with whitetail hunting) and never shot. Then, during a bitter November cold snap, we caught things just right. During the first day, freezing rain sluiced off the roof of the blind but later slacked to a cold drizzle. I was on the edge of one of those classic, wide Southern powerline rights-of-way, and a buck came out on the far side to tend a scrape.

Oh boy, can't afford another mistake. The deer was a heavy 8-pointer but not "big." Having messed up before, I was scared to death, but I took a deep breath and made the shot. Later we all agreed it was a nice buck, mature and never going to be a monster. Whew, good call!

In the afternoon the temperature plummeted, and my wife Donna and I were both freezing in an elevated stand farther down the powerline. The deer didn't mind the unseasonal cold, and the rut was in full swing. Toward sunset, a parade of bucks chased does back and forth across the 100-yard opening. All were small, young or both, but the activity was as good as it gets. The sun had long set and there were maybe 10 minutes of legal time left when three does came out to the left of the stand and stared into the black timber behind them.

The buck that followed was a fine 10-pointer with tall eyeguards—a good, solid deer and a no-brainer. The buck crashed off into the pines, but the shot from Donna's .270 looked good. It was full dark by the time we found him, a gorgeous Southern whitetail.

A couple days later, operating on pure instinct with no time to be sure, I shot a second buck crossing a narrow cutline in the Georgia pines. Although sure of the shot, I never found a drop of blood, just deep-cut tracks where I thought the buck had bolted.

He lay 40 yards into the pines, one of few animals in my life that just kept getting bigger the closer I got. I reached for my cell phone, found a bit of signal and tried to call Zack, but my hands were shaking too hard to press the buttons. He was an awesome buck, my best Southern whitetail. Also, since Georgia has a two-buck limit, it was the only time I have limited out on Southern whitetails.

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MAKING PLANS

Throughout the region, deer densities are high and whitetails are the major road hazard. However, the cover is thick and hunting is difficult. Public land can be limited, although there is much forest land open to public hunting in some areas if you dig a bit. Despite generous seasons and limits, cashing in on the full potential is unlikely, especially for an outsider (or Yankee, if you will).

Success depends on your goal as well as on local management. I offer this purely from an outsider's perspective, with no stones thrown toward management goals: When you step across the line from Alabama (buck-a-day limit for many years) to Georgia (longtime two-buck limit), you quickly encounter a different potential in bucks.

I take this in stride; I like to hunt whitetails and love their venison. I'm always hoping for a monster, but I'm also a realist. I'm happy to follow along with management goals and local standards. At Zack's place, we look for grown-up bucks because we know they are there. Sometimes we see one, sometimes not. Other times, in other places, any buck can be a sensible goal. And, wherever you're hunting whitetails, sometimes you're going to go home empty-handed.

Those long Southern seasons and generous limits are seductive, but whitetail hunting is an insider's game. Local hunters have a huge home-court advantage. If they're your backyard deer, you can watch moon, weather and wind, and track the rut. Few of us are so obsessed that we'll hunt every day of a several-month season; we wait until conditions are right, and then apply a full-court press.

When we're outsiders, though, we can't do that. On any hunt away from home, we have to pick a "good" time. It seems to me this is difficult with Southern whitetails! In my own home court in Kansas, there is no choice; for

While mornings and evenings can be cold, midday temps often rise considerably, making water vital for rutting deer. Scouting ponds for tracks is always a good strategy.

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rifle hunting it's that short period in late November and early December, usually catching the tail end of the primary rut. For archery, early November is reliable for pre-rut activity, with the rut usually peaking Thanksgiving week.

Southern whitetails are different. The rut hits at different times in different places, and perhaps because the weather is usually warmer, it seems the rut spreads out over a longer period. In southern Georgia, November usually catches the rut, but my friends in Alabama believe January sees the most rutting activity. That said, the pre-rut period, when bucks are rubbing and scraping, can be better than the rut itself, when buck movement is erratic and unpredictable. Given a choice, I try to avoid a post-rut hunt.

In Kansas, the rifle season has been locked in stone for decades. We can look up the moon phase, but we can't do anything about it. In contrast, the long Southern seasons allow us to plan a hunt during the dark of the moon and perhaps focus on the rut.

One critical factor we cannot plan around is weather, and in the South it's all over the map. That brutal November cold snap in southern Georgia, coinciding with the rut, was glorious, but I haven't hit those conditions again. Snow is unlikely, but it can rain. More frequently, it's too warm, with shirt-sleeve weather at dawn and midday highs into the 80s. Doesn't matter. The deer are used to it. They're going to move when they're going to move. You just need to be there.

TAKING A STAND

I don't go south for whitetails every year, but last season during the pandemic not much was happening. I did some driving rather than flying and headed south twice, to Georgia in early November and Alabama in January.

As an outsider, I plan my Southern whitetail excursions months ahead, picking a few days from a long season, trying to avoid a bright moon, and hoping the wind and weather will be favorable. Even if they are, there's no guarantee the right deer will move during any period of just a few days. Today, most Southern whitetails are taken from elevated stands. Based on wind and expected movement and feeding patterns, you put yourself in the best

A buck like this 3 1/2-year-old 8-point can be hard to pass, but the author had already taken one buck, making the choice a bit easier.

CRAIG BODDINGTON

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stand possible for the conditions, but the final move is up to the deer.

Zack and Debi Aultman's place in southern Georgia is a pine plantation that's well-managed for whitetails. Nobody is successful all the time, but I expect to see bucks here. The first evening I took the "Cherry Tree" stand, overlooking a long food plot on a mild, sunny afternoon. A couple of young 8-pointers came out early, and they were easy to pass. When the shadows grew long, a heavy-bodied buck stepped into the field. He was past mature, with funky, ugly antlers. Tough call! Age-wise, he fit the bill; I knew I should probably take him, but it was the first evening and I couldn't do it. He stayed out for a long time, as did the two young bucks, along with 20-some does. Then they all wandered back into the woods, and at dark the field was empty.

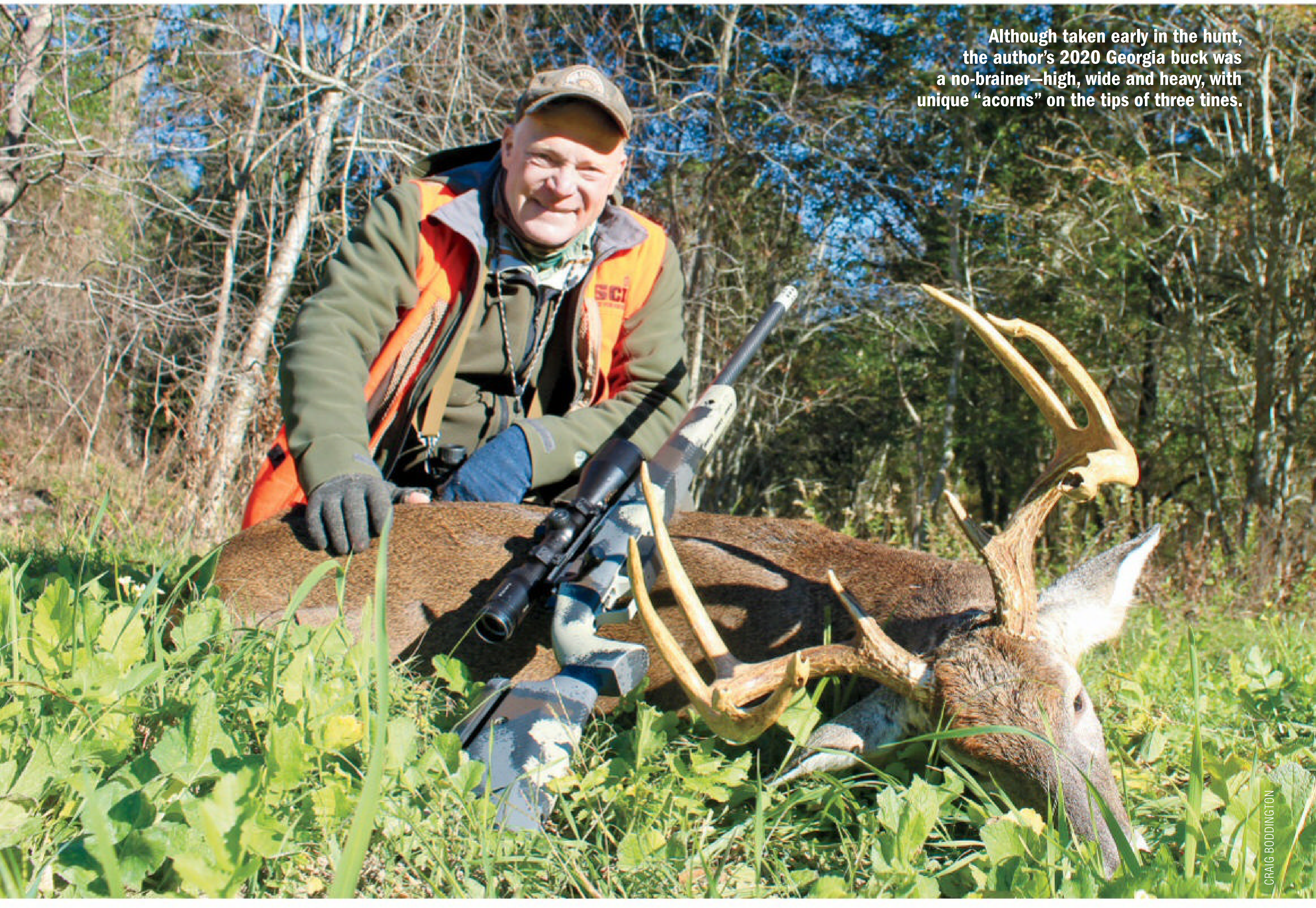
A couple days later, I did a morning hunt at "The Pond" stand, a gorgeous place overlooking a food plot with a perfect woodduck pond off to the left. It was still early, but long past full daylight, when a buck stepped to the edge of the woods near the pond and tended a scrape. This was an easy decision: The buck was big in the body with antlers that were high, wide and heavy. As he worked the scrape, I saw prominent "acorns" on several tines. No hesitation. I'd already switched binocular for rifle. Done with his marking, the buck trotted along the edge of the field toward me, and when he slowed, I shot him on the shoulder.

That was that. I hunted three more days and saw only young bucks. Lightning doesn't always strike twice, and that was just fine.

In January I joined friend Gordon Marsh, proprietor of the Wholesale Hunter e-commerce site. We started near his home close to Montgomery, but the bucks he'd been seeing on trail cameras had gone to ground. To change things up, we went a bit north to join Mike Crutchfield and Jeff Slatton at their deer lease, a classic Southern deer camp in the Alabama woods.

Here, I had no great expectations; we were just deer hunting in a fun place with wonderful people. I saw deer at every outing, which pretty much defines good deer hunting, but no antlers for several days. Not knowing the area, I alternated stands at my buddies' suggestions. The grass is always greener on the other side, and it's boring to stay in the same stand if you're not seeing much.

One stand was a tall tower overlooking an excellent food plot, where a good 10-pointer had appeared on trail cams. I saw just a few does from that stand, so I


Although taken early in the hunt, the author's 2020 Georgia buck was a no-brainer—high, wide and heavy, with unique "acorns" on the tips of three tines.

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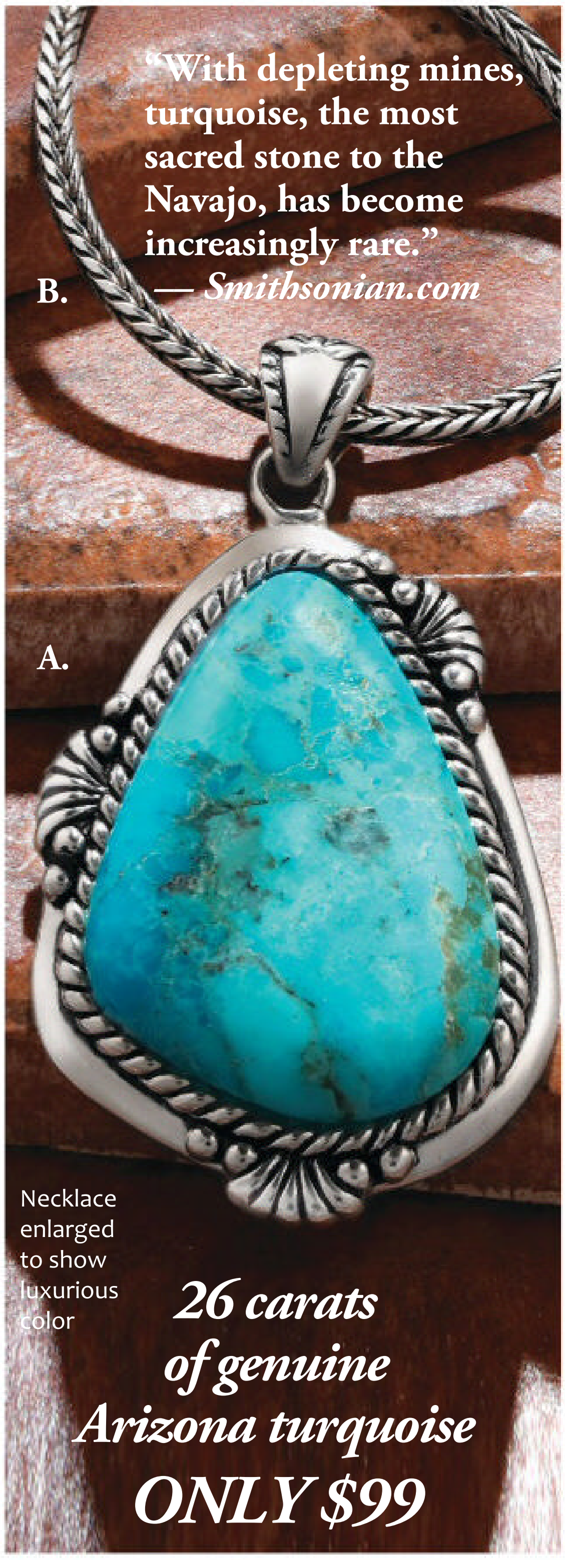
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was happy to switch around. However, I know that if a stand is well-sited and the wind is good, it's probably better to hold your ground. The day after I left, Mike shot a smashing buck from that stand. If I'd stayed put, maybe I'd have seen him … and maybe not. With whitetails, you can't always be in the right place at the right time.

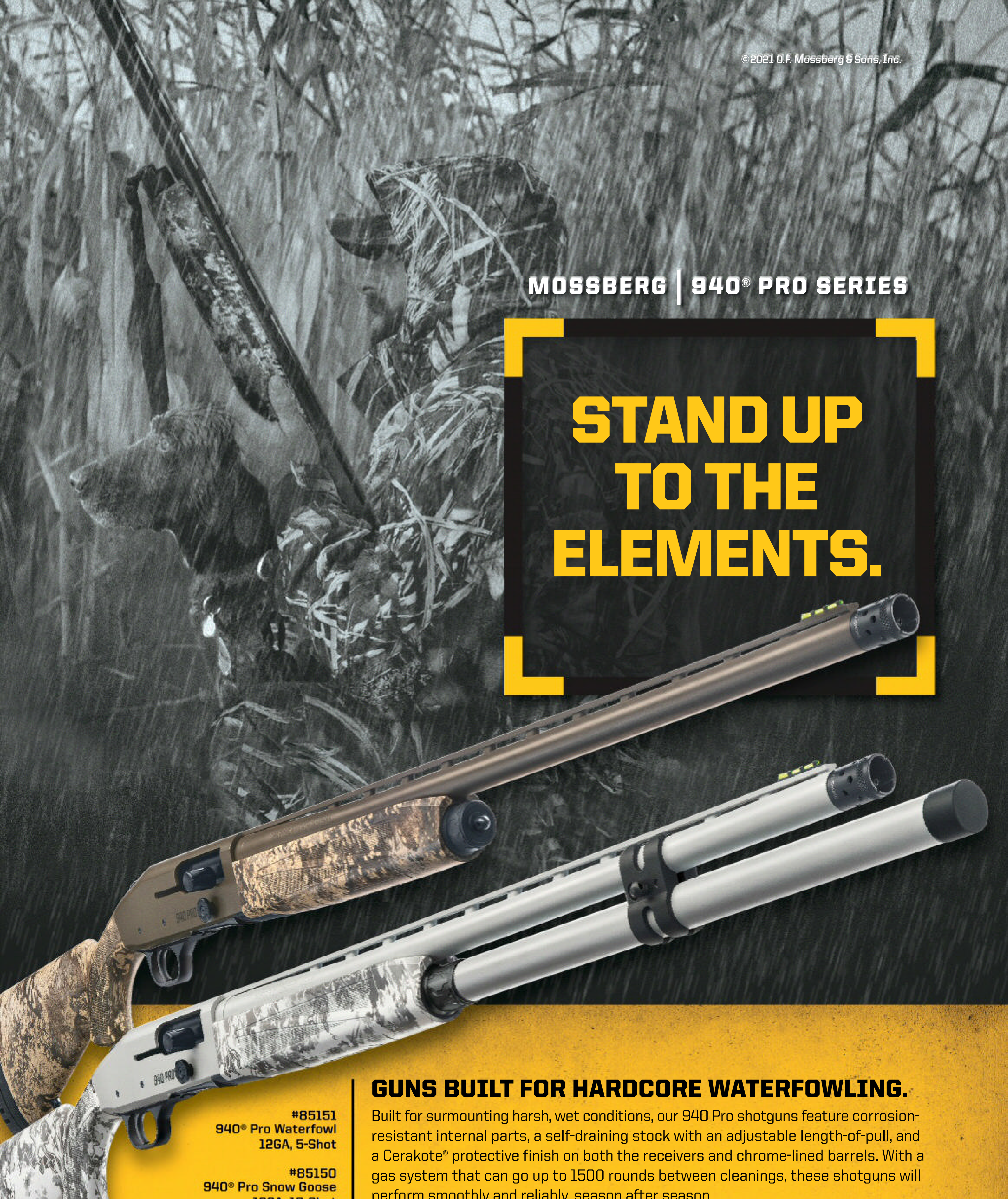
This area, too, had a long section of powerline, a feature inextricably linked to Southern deer hunting, at least in my mind. I was in a tower stand on a ridge, with the wind in my face and a good view in both directions. I'd seen a few does early and then nothing for two hours.

I was carrying a nice .270 that I'd never shot a deer with. I was itching to use it, but it wasn't my intent to take the first buck that came along. I wasn't exactly asleep, but for sure I was asleep at the switch. I'd been looking left; about 9:30 I swiveled right, and there were two bucks chasing three does 250 yards from the stand. I should have looked longer and harder, but I shot the larger of the two, dropping him in his tracks. Two days later Gordon shot a similar buck.

Alabama being Alabama, I didn't have to quit with my buck, and I didn't. I kept hunting, hoping for something bigger and a little older. Saw him, too, just at sunset on the last day. This one I looked over carefully. I think he was 4 years old, a heavy-antlered 6-pointer with either broken or absent eyeguards. I had the crosshair on him for a long time at 160 yards and then put the rifle down. It had been a great hunt, and even a "Yankee" doesn't always need to press the trigger. G&F

One of the highlights of any Southern deer camp is the food.

CRAIG BODDINGTON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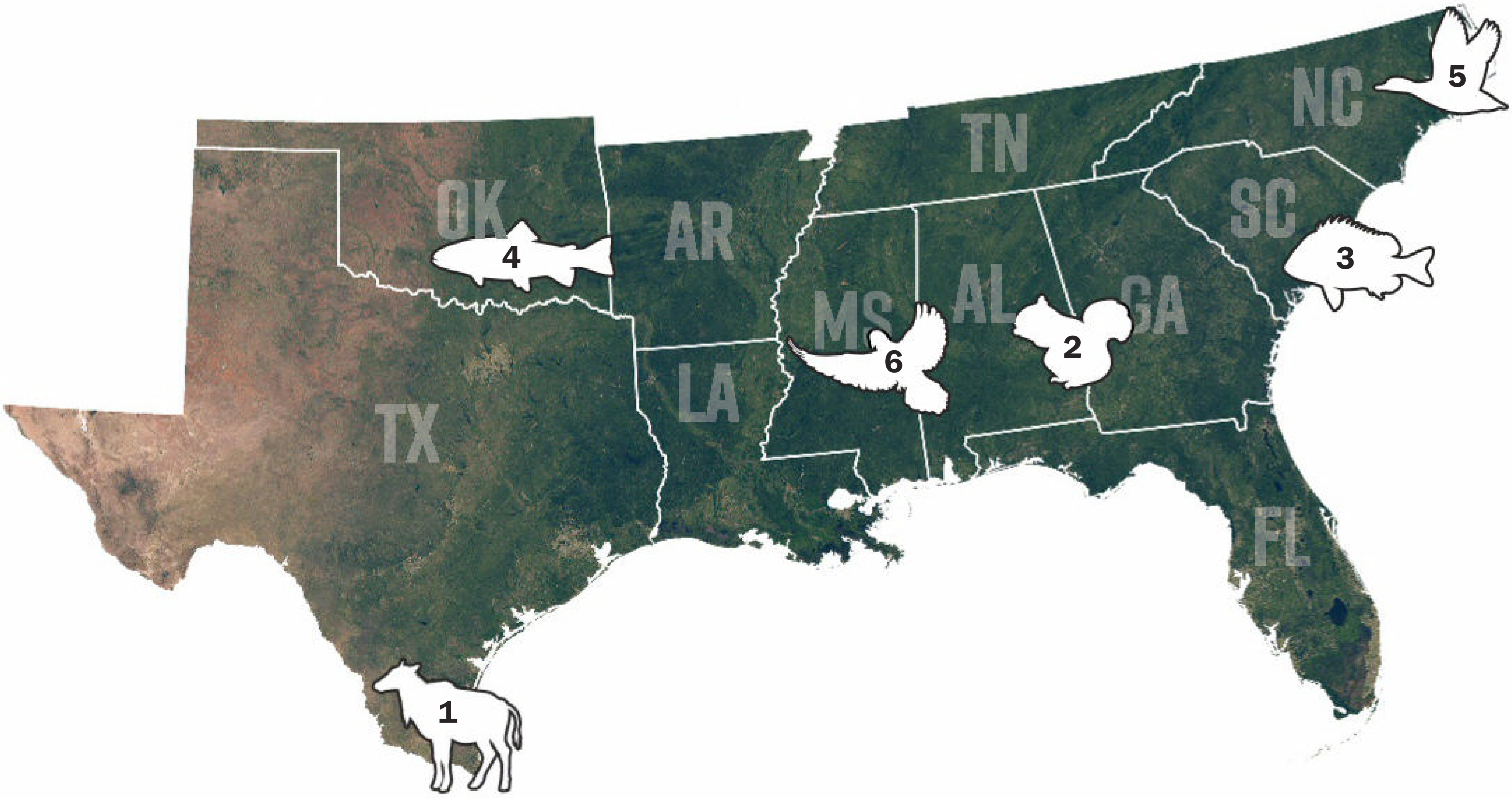
AROUND THE SOUTH

A SAMPLING OF THE REGION'S BEST HUNTING AND FISHING OPPORTUNITIES THIS WINTER

By T. Edward Nickens

Ol' Man Winter puts his cards on the table about now as duck migrations are going full steam while many deer seasons are winding down, but there's still a few Southern surprises once the going gets frosty. This year might be the year you spread your own wings and sample some of the region's lesser-known options—trout in Oklahoma, doves when you shiver in the fields instead of sweat and even trophy squirrels. And don't forget Pakistani antelope. Nothing says "Happy New Year" like a quarter-ton of exotic beast in your crosshairs.



1

TEXAS NILGAI

If hunting overseas isn't in the budget this year, you might consider the next best thing: Free-range nilgai antelope in Texas. Originally stocked on the King Ranch in the 1930s, there are now more nilgai roaming the Lone Star State than there are in the animals' native India and Pakistan. Classified as exotic, there is no closed season and no bag limits. Big ranches command big prices for a nilgai hunt, but there are some public-land opportunities like at the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. These open-country giants weigh better than 600 pounds, so even at retail rates the meat you'll bring home is worth the price of admission.

2

SOUTHERN FOXES

Gray squirrels have likely introduced more hunters to the thrill of the fall woods than any other game animal, but there's a bigger, badder, more highly sought tree rat to chase across the Southeast: *Sciurus niger,* or the fox squirrel. These are the brawlers of the treetops, nearly twice the size of an eastern gray squirrel. They come in an array of color schemes, from reddish gray to a nearly all-black coloring in some Southeastern pinewoods populations. Wherever you find them, aim for the head and don't let them fall on you. "They sound like a 3-pound sack of rice coming down through the trees," an old Cajun once told me about the racket made by a fox squirrel knocked from a tree branch.

SHUTTERSTOCK (3)

3

PALMETTO STATE SHEEPSHEAD

Snowbirds from the north might flock to South Carolina for the golf and (relatively) warm temperatures, and crowd restaurants for Calabash-fried shrimp. But the real sporting and culinary game starts just a few miles offshore, where sheepshead swarm the nearshore reefs in winter, and the gorging fish are a welcome target for cold-water anglers. Known for their bait-stealing soft takes, sheepshead are often a bit more aggressive on the winter reefs, as competition for food with other species dials up the feed. A GPS-lock-enabled trolling motor is a godsend, but you can still make a go of it with a standard anchor and line. Just don't try to fudge it. If you're five feet off the reef, you might as well be on the golf course.

4

OKLAHOMA TROUT

It's now prime time to lay into some Okie salmonids. Eight miles of the Lower Illinois River and a 12-mile stretch of the Lower Mountain Fork River offer tailwaters cold enough for year-round trout fishing. A robust winter stocking program offers a wading opportunity on the free-flowing Blue River in a classic trout stream setting, and a handful of lakes such as Lake Carlton and Lake Watonga attract still-water anglers who need a heartwarming, cold-water fishing fix.

5

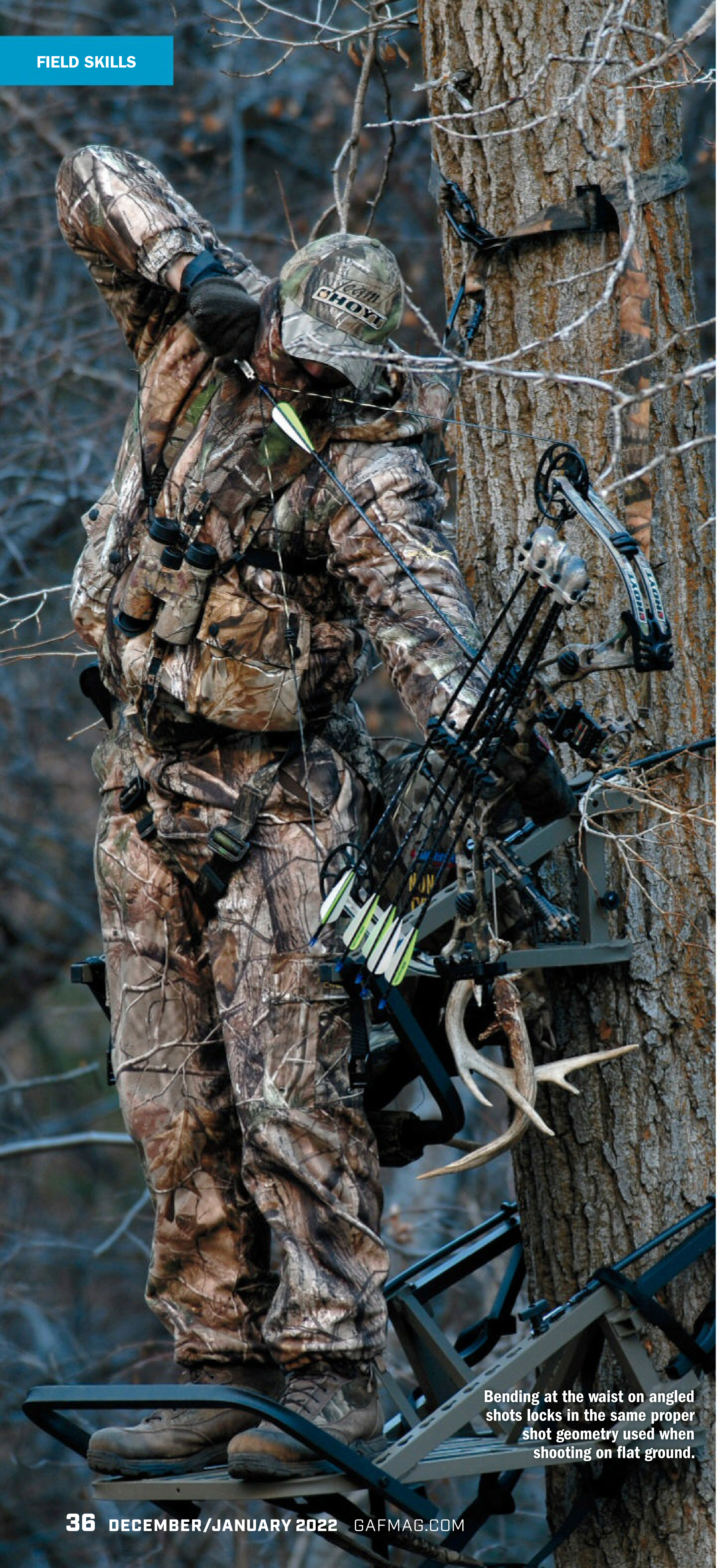
TAR HEEL SEA DUCKS

With 2 million acres of coastal sounds and Outer Banks barrier islands that jut deep into the Atlantic, North Carolina is the perfect site for intrepid waterfowlers willing to ride the waves for surf scoters, black scoters and the occasional long-tailed duck. Sea duck hunting is growing in popularity, and guides are obliging with both big rigs that can handle a small arsenal of guns and smaller craft alike. This is open-water, big-water, rough-water duck hunting, so come ready for raw conditions. And come ready to shoot: With generous bag limits and a shooting platform that literally rides the waves, you'll be giving your trigger a workout.

6

MISSISSIPPI DOVES

September doves may get all the headlines, but Deep South dove numbers get a mega boost in winter when big, porked-out birds from Midwest cornfields show up in droves. They've worked their way south for nearly a quarter of the year, and their arrival deep into winter can be a blisteringly-hot Christmas surprise that lasts well into the new year. Unlike the birds of early fall, winter doves aren't everywhere, but where there's grain on the ground, the birds will pile in. Get to the fields in the dark to set up for the early-morning feeds, and bring a big bucket—a fattened-up winter dove is worth three of its hot-weather kin.


Bending at the waist on angled shots locks in the same proper shot geometry used when shooting on flat ground.

JOHN HAFNER

MASTER THE CHIP SHOT

THE SHORT, STEEPLY ANGLED, ELEVATED BOW SHOT IS ONE OF THE TOUGHEST IN THE ARCHERY GAME. HERE'S HOW TO NEVER MISS IT AGAIN.

By Emily Kantner

Almost every bowhunter has blown a chip shot from the deer stand or whiffed one from a turkey blind. The geometry of steeply angled or short-distance shots can get confusing, especially when buck fever sets in.

A Booner steps out broadside at 30 yards downhill. Do you hold center, high or low? How about a bull bugling directly uphill? While it may seem counter intuitive, the answer is the same for both scenarios.

HIT THE ANGLES

The laws of physics dictate that objects moving horizontally, such as an arrow fired from a bow, are dramatically affected by gravity. So, if you sight in your bow on flat ground, your arrow will hit its target slightly higher when you shoot from both upward and downward angles.

For steeply angled shots, hold low on your target—whether you're 20 feet up a tree on the back 40 or aiming uphill at a backcountry bull. Although the ultra-fast speeds of today's bows minimize the effects of angled shots at close range, arrow trajectory will depend on your individual rig setup and specs.

Upgrading your optics can also eliminate some of the guesswork with these challenging shots. An angle-compensating rangefinder will account for the elevation and calculate the adjusted distance to your target, so you don't need to do the math on the fly.

ROCK-SOLID FORM

Probably the most important step to ensuring accuracy uphill or downhill is practicing proper form. Rather than leaning forward or backward to shoot, first come to full draw while standing upright, then bend at the waist to zero in on your target. This will help you maintain a consistent anchor point and correct form throughout the shot. Some bowhunters find a kisser button is helpful for adding yet another physical point of contact.

Shooting on an uneven hillside can also be a form-wrecker. Archers have the tendency to overcompensate for these angles and unintentionally cant—or tilt—the bow, which throws off aim in calm conditions. Holding your bow perfectly vertical on rolling terrain can be tough, but a bow sight equipped with a bubble level will show you when you're leaning left or right so you can correct course.

READY FOR YOUR CLOSE-UP

Possibly even more mind-boggling are the mechanics of ultra-close shots. If you have a gobbler strutting between the blind and your decoys at just 3 or 4 yards, using a 10-yard pin will guarantee you miss vitals—and maybe even the bird altogether.

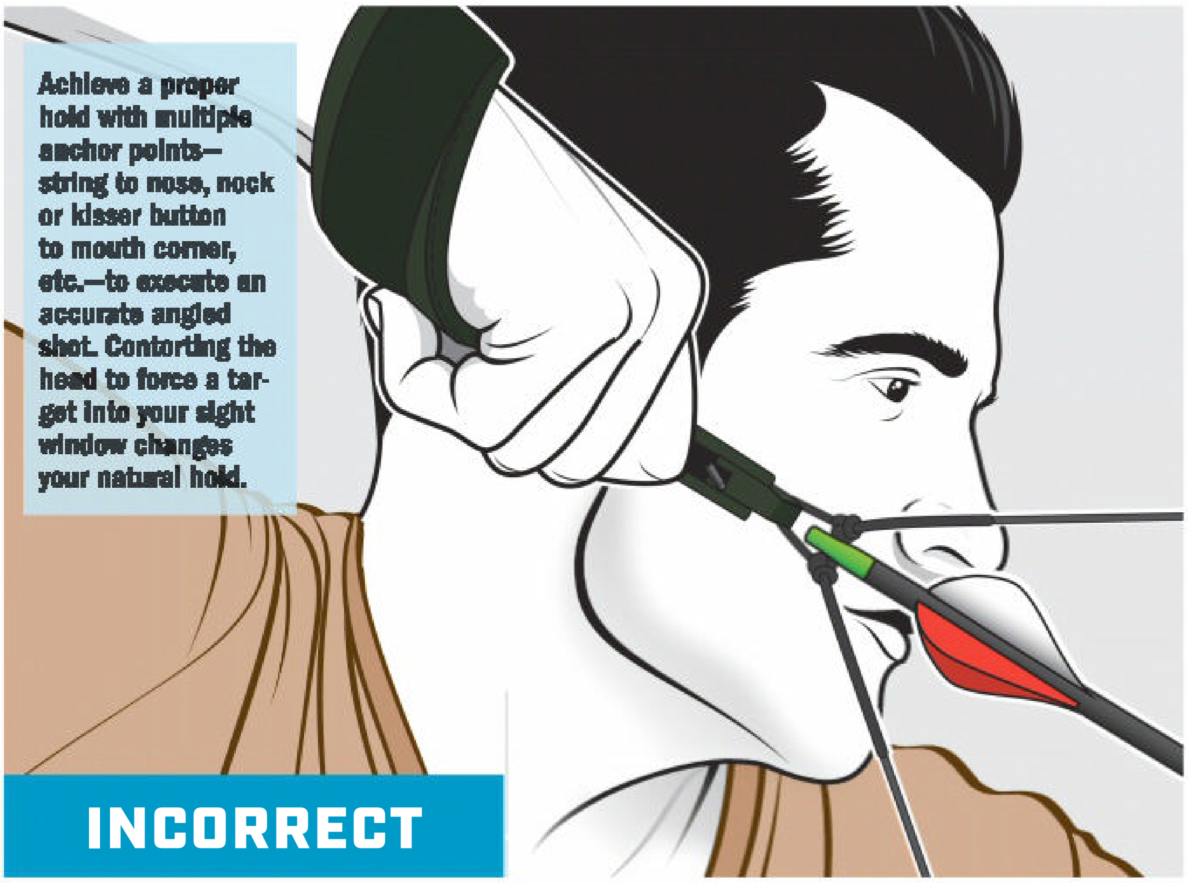
That's because your compound spits arrows out a few inches below your line of sight. So, at that close of a range, your arrow is still traveling up to reach that level. Typically, aiming with your 40-yard pin will be deadly in that 3- to 4-yard range.

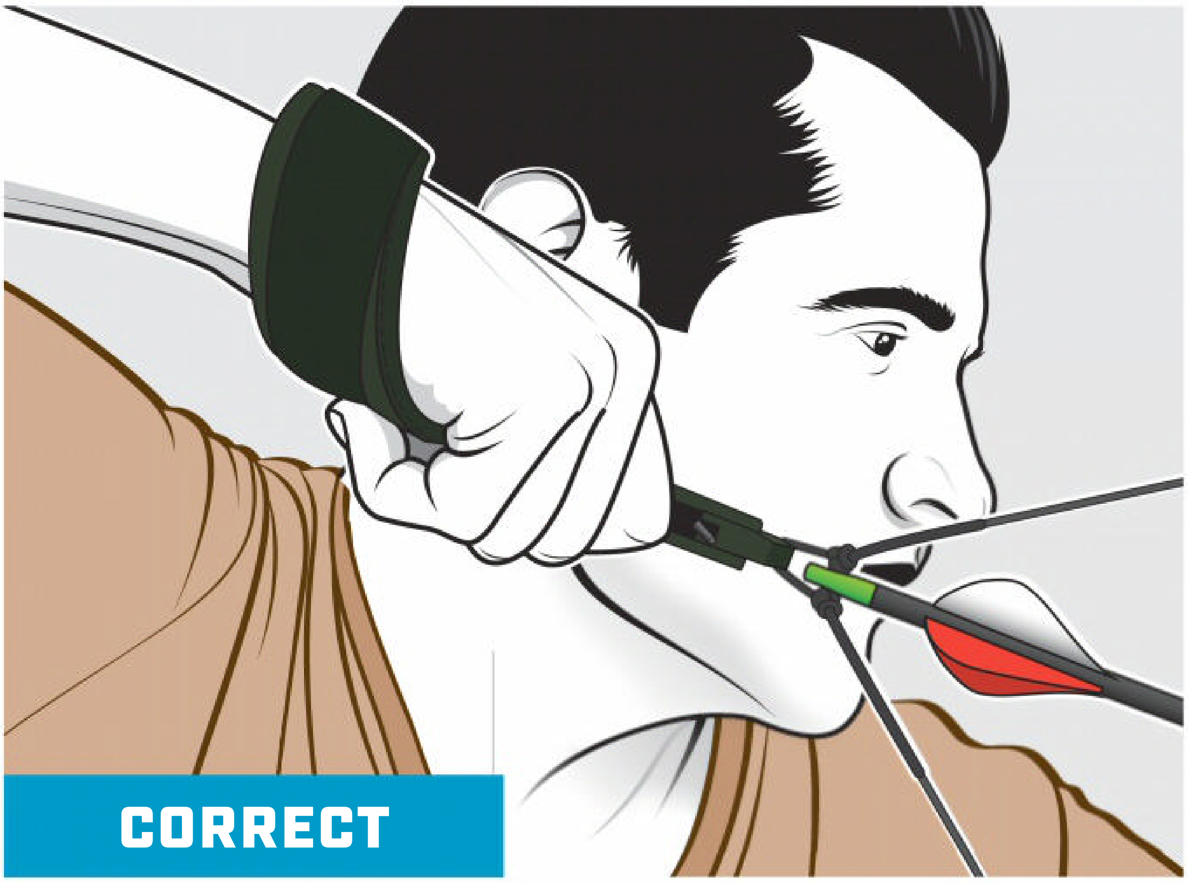
Similarly, if a deer stops below your treestand at just a few yards, using your top pin will likely result in a low, nonlethal hit. A 40-yard pin is usually the most accurate in this situation as well, and proper bend-at-the-waist form is crucial for a clean kill.

PRACTICE MAKES PREPARED

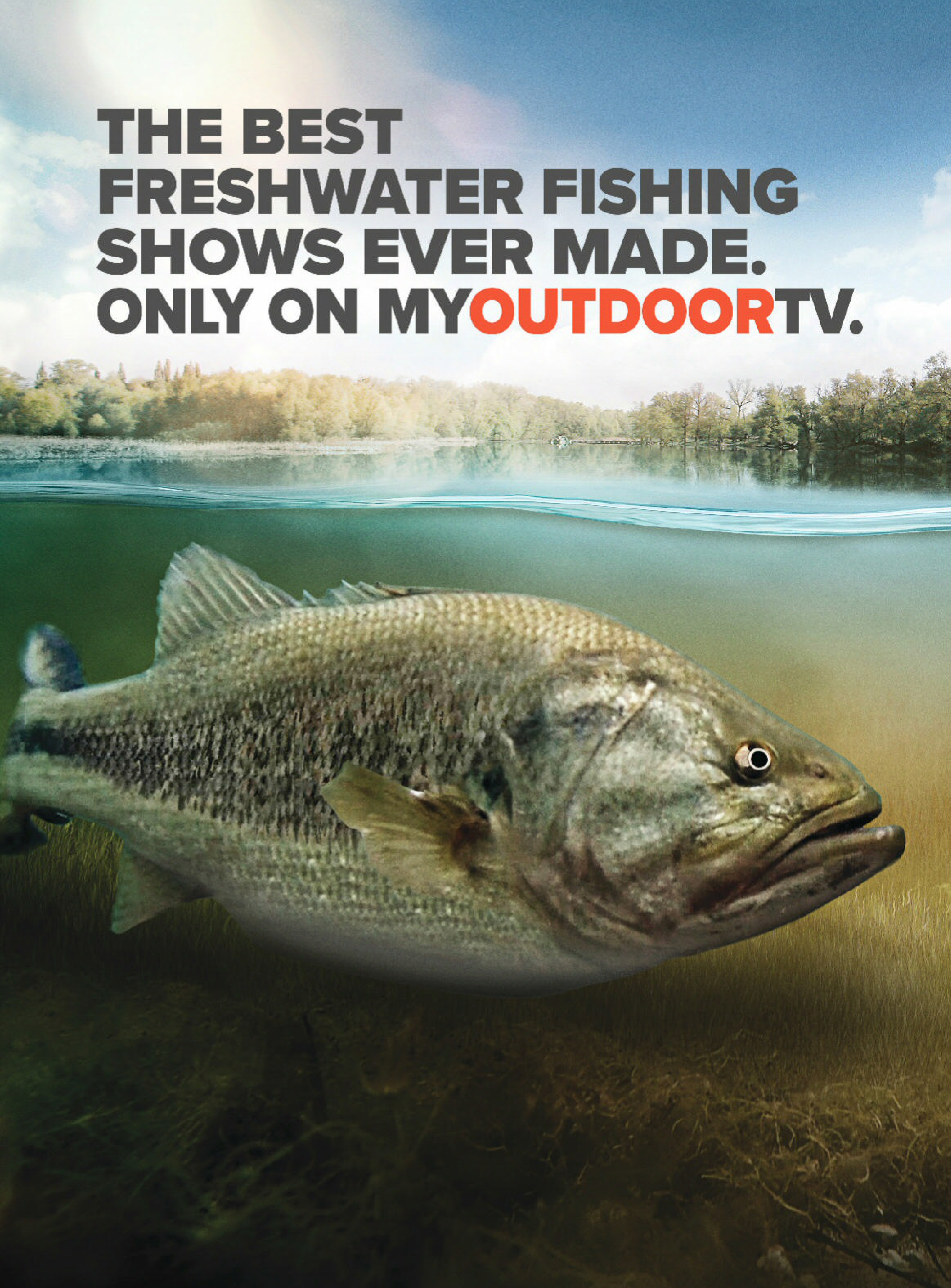
With widely varying draw lengths and arrow weights, there's no one hard-and-fast rule for how low to aim or which pin will be dead-on for ultra-close shots. It's important to test your own gear and see how it performs in each scenario.

Your best bet—and the ethical thing to do—is to consistently practice with your hunting setup from every possible position, angle and distance you might encounter in the field. Shoot from an elevated platform, sitting down and at close range, and you'll increase the odds of nailing your next chip shot. G&F


Achieve a proper hold with multiple anchor points—string to nose, nock or kisser button to mouth corner, etc.—to execute an accurate angled shot. Contorting the head to force a target into your sight window changes your natural hold.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETER SUCHESKI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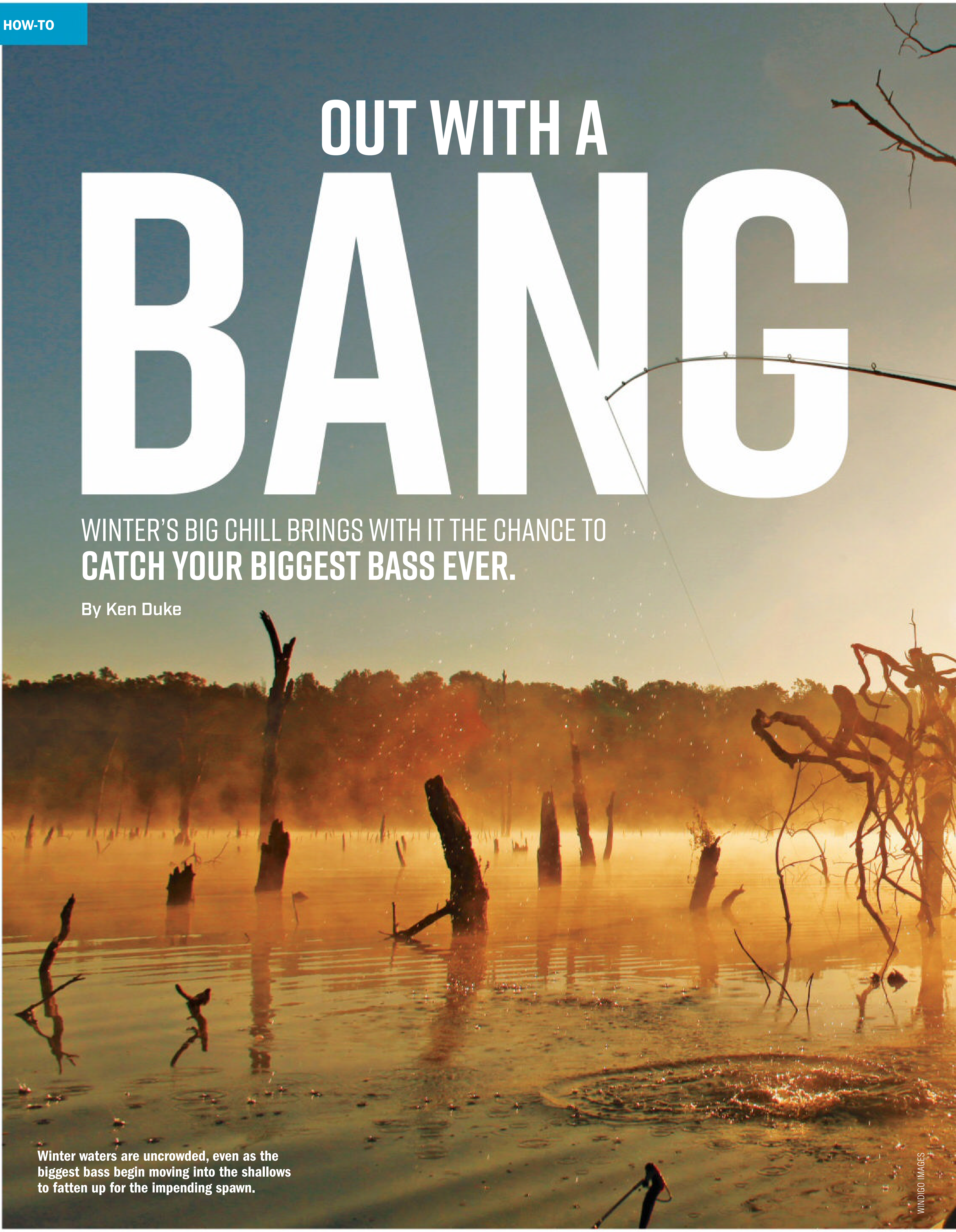
OUT WITH A BANG

WINTER'S BIG CHILL BRINGS WITH IT THE CHANCE TO CATCH YOUR BIGGEST BASS EVER.

By Ken Duke



Winter waters are uncrowded, even as the biggest bass begin moving into the shallows to fatten up for the impending spawn.

WINDIGO IMAGES

When is your very best chance to catch the bass of a lifetime? Well, if you're fortunate enough to fish in the Deep South, the answer is right now. The lunker stars are aligning, and good things are happening if your goal is a giant bass.

So why is now so good? Just think about it. While your sights are set on an honest-to-goodness big 'un, much of the rest of the fishing world is distracted. They're prepping for or recovering from the holidays, they're climbing trees in search of deer, they're relaxing on the recliner with the TV remote in hand or they're not willing to brave the chilly weather. No matter their distraction, it's all working to your advantage. The anglers you're usually competing with for the best bass spots are nowhere near the water, and that's great.

Then there are the bass themselves. It's not time for them to spawn, but the biggest of the species are often the earliest to shake off the winter doldrums in advance of spring and the mating season. The biggest of the bass clan are the most likely to be the first to the shallows, the first to start feeding up for the spawn and the first to find their way to staging areas just off the bays and nooks they'll use for nesting in a month or two or even three.

BE THERE

There's little substitute for time on the water. That's true all year long, not just in winter. The more you're out there, the better your chances for finding and catching the bass of a lifetime. But if your time is limited—like the rest of us—you can put the odds in your favor by keeping your fishing hours flexible.

Is there a warm front coming through after weeks of really cold weather? Get out there. Did a cold front just pass after lots of unseasonably warm weather? Stay home.

If you're a believer in solunar or other fishing tables, take a look at those and choose the best days. The only certainty is that you can't catch bass if you're not on the water, and even a bitterly cold post-frontal day is better than no fishing at all.

But whether you're lucky enough to choose your fishing days or your fishing days are essentially chosen for you, try to get out on consecutive days whenever possible. Why? Because accumulated time on the water reveals things to the alert angler, and a lull in feeding has to come to an end sometime. A cold front—no matter how severe—won't shut down feeding forever, and you want to be the angler on the water when the bass get busy eating again.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

December and January are not April and May. In April and May, you might be hard-pressed to pick a lure that won't catch fish. During the coldest part of the year, though, you'd be wise to narrow your selection of lures and locations. When it comes to lures, take a look at the water temperature of your favorite lake or river. The colder it is, the more your choices are restricted. If the water's in the 30s and low 40s, stick to jigs, jigging spoons, drop-shot rigs, shaky heads and things that can be fished extremely slowly. In waters that are a little warmer, you can add swimbaits, jerkbaits and horizontal lures than can be fished a little faster. If things are really warm, lure selection can run the gamut, but generally focus on baits that are larger than average for two reasons.

First, most forage in the bass' world is fully grown by winter. There are no immature baitfish or tiny crawfish. Second, we're targeting big bass now. They eat more often than other bass, and they can eat bigger things than other bass. The best way to tempt them is by making it worth their while. A larger meal does that.

CREEP IT

Being cold-blooded, bass tend to be relatively lethargic in winter, so slower is generally better. They're not likely to chase down fast-moving prey like they might in May or June, and they're not likely to be triggered into a reaction strike as the result of a fast retrieve. Instead, make it easy on them by keeping your baits moving slowly—especially when it's really chilly.

When it comes to locations, think clear water, think vertical and think spawn. Nothing shuts bass fishing down quite like cold, muddy water. If you visit your favorite fishery and find that the water temperature is in the 40s with visibility measured in inches rather than feet, go home. Wait for the weather to warm or the water to clear—preferably both.

Vertical structure and cover is ideal for cold-weather bassin' since it allows lethargic fish to move up and down in the water column as conditions change without having to move far horizontally. Bluff banks, ledges, standing timber, even deep boat docks all excel now.

Even though the bass are not yet ready to spawn, that doesn't mean we shouldn't be thinking about it. Spawning is the most significant event on the bass' calendar, so stay close to those areas where you've seen beds before. Now turn your back to the spawning area and look to the first drop-off, channel or deep point near prime bedding spots. It's a good bet that big winter bass will be there.

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Plan your time on the water in winter according to the weather. Several warm days in succession will drive fish to feed.

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In winter, big bass look for big meals. Large lures offer a more enticing option and draw more strikes.

DRESS FOR SUCCESS

While it seems rudimentary, to catch big bass when it's crazy cold you've got to be comfortable. Being comfortable means you fish better. Everyone knows that layering is the key to staying warm and comfortable in cold weather, but not everyone has a clear idea about how the layers should work. Here's your guide.

BASE LAYER: The base layer is next to your body. It's there to keep you dry by wicking moisture away from the skin. A base layer is essential not just for staying warm in cold conditions, but also for staying cool on hot days when wearing breathable waterproof outer garments. The best base layers are made from synthetic fibers, merino wool or a blend of both. Never wash polyester or any base layer in fabric softener, as the fibers will become contaminated and restrict wicking. And never wear cotton clothing on the water in winter. Cotton can absorb moisture and suck the heat out of your body.

Ideal base layer fabrics will be smooth on the inside (for optimal contact with the skin) with a three-dimensional weave on top (for greater surface area). When the moisture is wicked to the surface of the material, it dissipates, allowing it to move away from the skin faster. The fabric should also be antimicrobial to resist odor. Wicking and antimicrobial qualities will wash out over time. Get a new base layer every year if you fish a lot.

MID LAYER: The mid layer is there to trap dry, warm air close to the body. Mid layers are typically fleece or lofted garments, like those that feature down or a synthetic fill. If you're still cold, trap more air by wearing more fleece. The mid-layer must be highly breathable to allow moisture to pass through. Having moisture trapped next to your body is no good when it's cold. Wear a good quality pair of wool socks to keep feet warm, and don't lace your shoes or boots extremely tight.

OUTER LAYER: Finally, the outer layer must be waterproof and breathable. A jacket and bibs provide real protection against the elements. To keep moisture out, the jacket should include a hood and protective collar system, a protective flap over the front zipper and adjustable inner cuffs. When it comes to jacket fit, be sure to leave some room for bibs and a mid-layer. Few things in winter fishing are more frustrating than a long day in a suit that restricts movement.

The technology and comfort behind quality cold-weather clothing isn't cheap. But the expense will pay dividends with more time on the water and more big bass in the boat.

KNOCK THE CHILL OFF

HUK's new thermal suit keeps anglers warm when temps dip.

HUK is best known for their quality line of fishing shirts, with their polyester pullovers being an industry standard. For the new year they have entered the heavy-duty outerwear market with their Icon X jacket and bib. The **Icon X Superior Jacket** ($300; hukgear.com) features removable foam inserts to keep you afloat should you go overboard (the Icon X is not a certified PFD). With a 100-percent polyester construction treated with a specialized finish that sheds water, the jacket is fully wind- and waterproof. Abrasion-resistant material in wear areas aid with durability. A two-piece hood, internal cuff gussets, body-mapped insulation and magnetic pocket flaps round out the design.

The **Icon X Superior Bib** ($300) features the same windproof and waterproof construction as the jacket and completes this foul-weather ensemble. Removable foam float inserts are located in the seat and knee regions. Easily adjustable suspenders allow for total mobility with superior comfort, and fleece-lined handwarmer pockets offer safe refuge from the biting cold. Waterproof zippers provide excellent barriers to external moisture, while leg zips make for easy on/off in ever-changing weather conditions.
—Dr. Todd A. Kuhn

BILL LINDNER PHOTOGRAPHY

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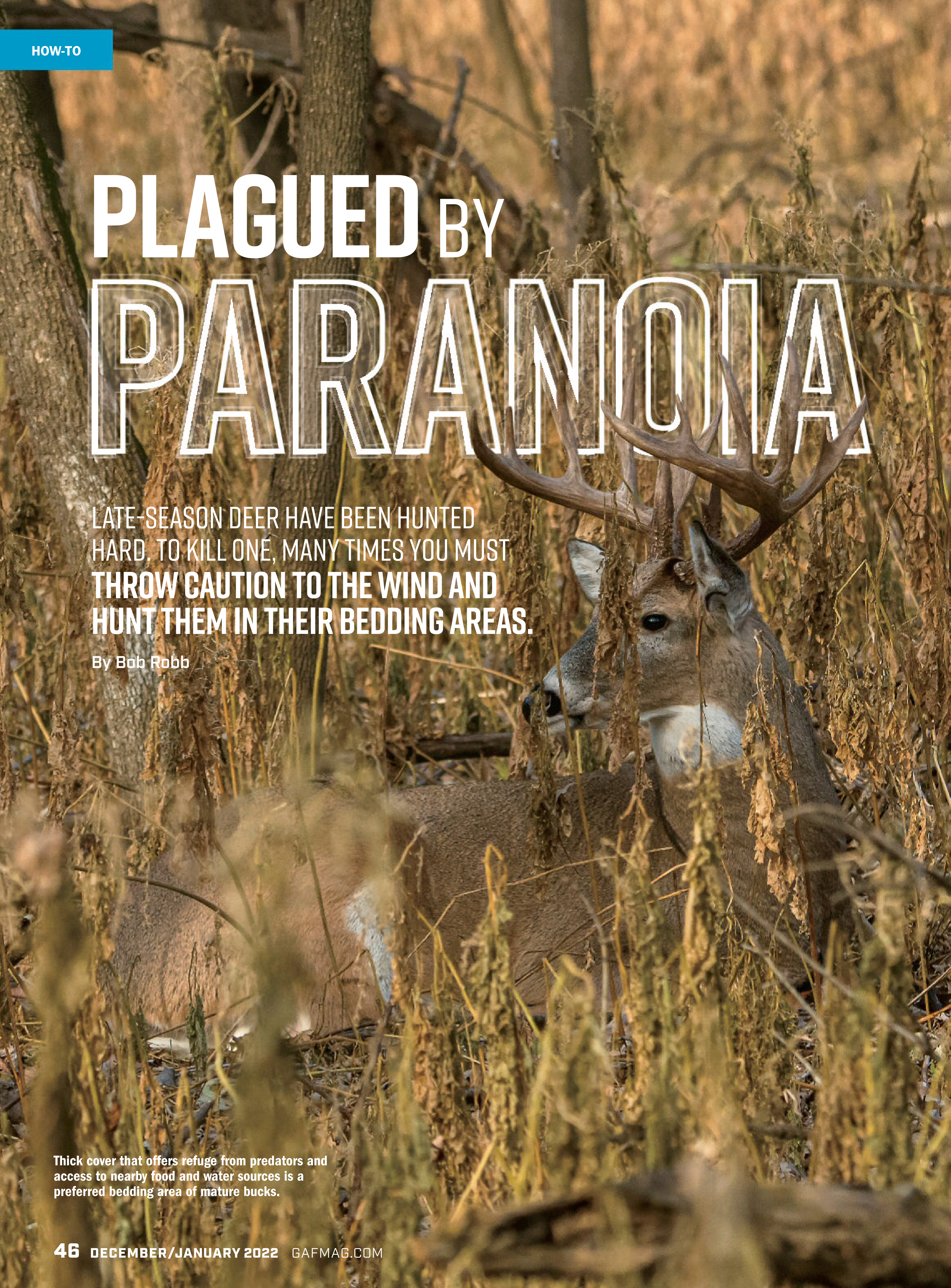


PLAGUED BY PARANOIA

LATE-SEASON DEER HAVE BEEN HUNTED HARD. TO KILL ONE, MANY TIMES YOU MUST **THROW CAUTION TO THE WIND AND HUNT THEM IN THEIR BEDDING AREAS.**

By Bob Robb

Thick cover that offers refuge from predators and access to nearby food and water sources is a preferred bedding area of mature bucks.

JOHN PENNOYER (MAIN); BOB ROBB (RIGHT)

It was very late in the season and I had a tag to punch. I was hunting some well-managed lands controlled by Alabama deer and turkey hunting legend Larry Norton (a two-time world turkey calling champion). During that hunt, Larry said something that stunned me. "Bob, it's warm out, and the deer aren't moving. We need to go hunt their bedroom."

Are you nuts? I remember thinking, but when in Rome ... So, that's what we did. We made a quick midday "stealth scout" with a stand and some ladder sticks in tow, found a fabulous spot where three well-used trails intersected about a hundred yards from a known bedding thicket, hung the stand and I climbed aboard. Six hours later—right at dark—I saw a big-bodied 8-point slink out of the brushy swale right down my trail. I arrowed him at 10 steps.

That was 30-some seasons ago, and at the time, even thinking about invading a deer's bedding area went completely against all deer hunting dogma. That was just one of many lessons I learned from Larry, and I've been using it ever since. Truth be told, you can hunt right up against a bedding area, if you do it smartly.

Topographic maps—whether on paper or an app—can offer clues to where late-season bucks bed.

WHERE ARE THEY BEDDED?

Step one, of course, is figuring out where bucks are bedding. Late-season, post-rut bucks are tired and they mostly want to be left alone. They also need to eat, eat, eat, to replenish all that body weight they dropped during the chase phase.

I begin my search backwards. That is, I locate the high-calorie foods deer prefer this time of year, then check them for fresh buck sign like big tracks and droppings, or I glass them from afar on the cusp of daylight.

Agricultural fields and food plots filled with corn, soybeans, winter wheat, turnips, radishes and winter peas are all prime deer magnets now. However, don't overlook fruit trees like apples and persimmons that might continue to bear some fruit. And never, ever forget about acorns. If it's been a good year and there are acorns left on the ground, the deer will find them. Natural browse like honeysuckle, dewberry, dogwood, blackberry cane and Oregon grape are all examples of regional species that are highly favored by deer and often available into the late season.

Once fresh deer sign is located, use your knowledge of the property, supplemented with topographic maps, aerial photos and/or a hunting app, to find likely bedding thickets close to the food source. Don't forget to include water in the equation when sleuthing out travel routes. With this information in hand, you can plot perceived travel patterns that will require on-the-ground checking. Once likely bedding areas are located, mark them on your maps and apps.

IS IT HUNTABLE?

Where bucks bed depends on the type of terrain, but always remember that a mature buck's bedding area will have at least one good escape route to get to other nearby secure locations. They like to bed along a barrier—a patch of thick brush, a blow-down or a waterway, for example—and face an open area. They will often rotate in their beds as the day goes on so they have the wind at their backs and they stay out of the sun. They are often able to hear or smell an intruder long before they see it, and leave undetected.

Regardless, the area must be huntable. Rest assured, there are some bedding areas that are basically unhuntable, depending on where they're located. Unless you have an ingress/egress route that permits you to be a stealth bomber, it's best to stay back and hunt the staging areas between food, water and bed. If a bedding area is in a hollow with an ever-swirling wind, pass it by. On an elevated ridge with the deer bedding on the point? Definitely not.

An unfavorable wind can ruin a bedding-area hunt in a matter of seconds. Hunt a favorable wind only and check it often while on stand.

LATE-SEASON GEAR

Essential items for a stealthy, productive wintertime whitetail hunt.

SCENT CONTROL: Sitting tight to bedding thickets requires a meticulous scent control regimen that includes showering then donning freshly laundered clothing for every stand shift. At the tree, liberally spray down everything with a scent-eliminating spray. **Wildlife Research Center's Scent Killer Gold** is ultra-concentrated and stops offensive odors. ($25.59/24 oz.; wildlife.com)

SCENT KILLER GOLD

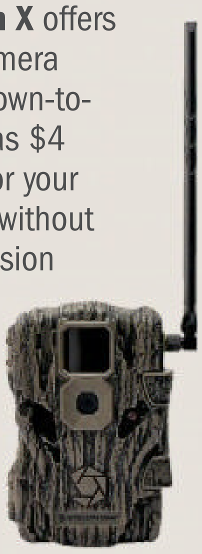
SCENTS: Late-season bucks will show interest in doe-in-heat scents, even if the peak of the rut is past. Don't be afraid to run a drag line featuring a doe estrous scent when walking to your stand (especially for a morning sit), then hanging some scent-soaked wicks near your tree, too.

Buck-Fire Raging Estrus is a premium line of high-performance lures crafted in small batches by the scent masters at Wildlife Research Center. Raging Estrus is perfect for soaking drags and wicks. ($29.99/4 oz.; wildlife.com)

RUBBER BOOTS: Knee-high, soft-soled rubber boots are the ticket for silent walking, plus they help control your scent profile. **Dryshod's Shredder MXT** has a cupped outsole with high sidewalls for support. Big sole lugs provide a great grip across a variety of winter terrains. ($129; dryshodusa.com)

TRAIL CAMERAS: If you know where common bedding areas are on your property, you can set scouting cameras early in the season, checking them only if and when necessary. I like to set cameras on trails leading to the area, not right among the bedding thicket itself, to minimize intrusion. Where legal, wireless cameras that transmit images directly to a device are great.

Stealth Cam's Fusion X offers excellent remote trail camera performance at a very down-to-earth price. For as little as $4 a month, you can monitor your favorite whitetail haunts without setting foot there. The Fusion X takes both stills and records video. A powerful app allows you to check, sort and manage your pics and videos. ($119; stealthcam.com)



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The author arrowed this late-season trophy after slipping in and setting up close to a bedding area.

HOW DO I HUNT IT?

The very best way to hunt a bedding area is to find it long before the season ever begins, then go hang a stand or three so you can hunt them with minimal noise and disturbance months later. Set as many stands as is practical for you and the ground you hunt. That way, when it's time to go hunting, you can assess the prevailing environmental conditions and choose a stand accordingly. It's exceptionally difficult to set a stand within a hundred yards of bedded deer quietly, but if you need to hang a new sit, use the quietest gear made.

Pad all metal parts and buckles, wear soft garments and soft-soled rubber boots. Take your time. Stealth and silence are everything. Alternatively, you can opt for a climbing stand if an appropriate tree is available. If you choose the climber route, make sure you take your time climbing, going slowly and quietly.

Knowing every little terrain feature on the property will help you sneak in undetected. Move on cat's paws when approaching or departing a bedding area. If you're heading for an evening stand, glass as you go. The best conditions for approaching a bedding area include a steady wind that both keeps your scent out of the bedroom and masks the sound of everything you do.

If the ground is wet, so much the better. If the ground is dry and crackly and there's no wind, it's best to wait for another day. Plan on taking a lot of time to cover that last hundred yards to the stand. If you accidentally snap a twig or kick a rock, stop. Deer hear these sounds all the time, so by itself it's not fatal unless it's accompanied by the sound of a person walking. Once on stand, forget the deer calls. You're hunting the bedroom because the deer are already here, or on their way. No need to make unnecessary noise that might spook them.

HUNT EARLY OR LATE?

When deciding whether to hunt mornings or evenings, consider these points. If you hunt mornings, you need to be in your stand at least an hour before first light so the world has a chance to settle down before the buck shows up. Also, be cognizant that bucks often circle downwind as they approach their beds.

Afternoon hunts are more difficult now because deer your target buck and potentially others are already bedded there. While approaching and getting into an evening stand is exceptionally difficult, I still like hunting evenings for one simple reason: These mature, pressured deer are already nocturnal, or nearly so. More than once I've seen them either stand up in their bed or move toward me with a few minutes of shooting light left. If you're back another 200 or 300 yards—waiting for them to make their way to you—they'll never get to you before it's too dark for a shot.

Your stand's proximity to a bedding area will depend on a number of variables, but 100 yards is a good rule of thumb.

AM I TOO CLOSE?

When hunting bedding areas, how close is too close? That depends on many things. Personally, I think 100 yards is about as close as I want to get, though I have gotten closer. And when I thought I was at the 100-yard mark after hiking in the dark, I've had deer come and bed within spitting distance of me. It's a game-time judgment call based on a hatful of factors.

What if you bust deer out of the bedroom? Well, if you hunt bedding areas long enough you will. Chances are that the party is over, but not forever. If the buck was spooked and didn't identify a human as the culprit, it just might come back. That's because he's bedding there for a simple reason—it's kept him alive for several years. You might give it another go in a week or so, and certainly next season. G&F

BOB ROBB (TOP); JOHN HAFNER (BOTTOM)

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HIT THE HOLES

WHEN THE WEATHER TURNS TOUGH, THE TOUGH HEAD UPRIVER.

Story and Photos by Frank Sargeant

An airboat can make it easy to skim over saltwater flats made exceptionally shallow by strong cold-front winds, especially on low tide.

Capt. Chet Jennings' airboat slalomed down the Little Manatee River, buffeted by an icy wind out of the north. It would have been a great day for duck hunting. But we had fishing rods, not shotguns, and our targets were winter reds, seatrout and snook, not waterfowl.

We hit the open waters of Tampa Bay and were greeted with a vast plain of water so shallow the seagrass tops were all turned over, floating on the surface. The combination of a strong wind, a falling tide and a dark moon had pulled the plug on the big bay, and there were just inches of water on the flats where normally there are two feet or more.

For Jennings (fishintampa.com) and his airboat, it was all good. We skated along, the flat-bottomed boat drawing no more water than a mallard, until we were about 5 miles south of the river. Then he abruptly shut down the big Cadillac engine and the boat coasted to a stop.

"They're in a hole about a hundred yards down the shore," he told me and an angling buddy. We'll walk from here."

The "hole" was not one most anglers would notice—it was barely a good cast wide and about 3 feet deep, at the point where a mangrove creek met the open flats. But it was the only water deep enough to float gamefish for a quarter mile, and the fish were taking advantage of it.

FISH ON

I cast a 3-inch D.O.A. Shrimp into the middle of the hole. It hadn't fallen a foot when the line jumped and I set the hook into a fat 2-pound sea trout. Seconds later my pal hooked up a similar fish on a Z-Man DarterZ, a single-hook jerkbait, and Jennings, also fishing a plastic shrimp, stuck a trout as well.

In the next 10 minutes we landed six nice trout from the hole, plus a baby snook and a keeper-sized mangrove snapper before the bite shut down. "There are still fish in there but they're not going to bite for a while now," said Jennings. "We'll find some more."

And so we did, about a half-mile down the shore where another mangrove creek dropped into an oyster hole on the edge of the flats. This one had nothing but redfish, all in the 18- to 24-inch range, plus a lone sheepshead that managed to hook itself on the D.O.A. Shrimp.

That was it on the pothole action—we tried two others that were fishless—but Jennings then ran us down to the Port Manatee Channel, where he anchored within casting range of a couple of spoil bars separated by a narrow cut that was creating a visible current as the last of the tide fell out into the deep ship channel.

We threw MirrOlure 52Ms into the upper end of the cut and hopped them back down toward the deep water—but they never got there. Both of us hooked up to slot-sized snook that immediately went airborne. Mine sent my lure sailing back to me, while my pal brought his, a 27-incher, to the boat for a quick photo before sending it on its way.

We spent another couple hours jumping from one deep-water refuge to another, catching fish in several of them, until the tide started coming back strong and Jennings advised us that the bloom was off the rose for the morning.

Winter coastal angling across the Southeast can be like that, particularly

Potholes are most often found where tidal creeks meet open flats. Sea trout are the frequent catch, but reds and sheepshead roam these holes, too.

The occasional big snook can be a bonus for those who understand where to find and fish potholes during the winter.

NOR'EASTER

What to do when the north winds blow.

Trying to fish light lures and live shrimp in a blustery north wind can be a challenge. It pays to try to put yourself on the north side of the hole so that the wind is your friend, not your enemy. And, with a strong wind, if you make an overhand cast and aim high, the bait is carried farther, which is great for an unweighted shrimp.

In some spots you simply cannot get on the north side, so there you might want to switch to a side-arm presentation and keep your cast low to the water. It still won't be great, but it will usually travel far enough to get you to the fish.

Another tactic to beat the wind is to put your bait under a cork and float it to the fish. This requires a cooperative current, of course, but if you can position yourself on the uptide side of your spot and then rig your slip cork so that the bait just ticks bottom, it will find the fish for you as it drifts through the pothole.

Wading is often part of fishing potholes. A pair of waders will keep you warm and dry while offering some protection from rays and other underwater hazards.

after the first fronts, as flats fish that don't like cold water look for refuges away from the plunging air temperatures and chilling north winds.

Why don't the fish simply move into the open bays? Undoubtedly many do, but there are also a lot that head for the potholes, dredged canals, shipping channels and other areas surrounded by shallow water. One thought is they do it to escape predation by bottle-nosed dolphins, which are warm-blooded and can easily run down cold-blooded fish including trout, reds and other species slowed by dropping temperatures. The holes, surrounded by water only inches deep, can't be reached by Flipper.

FINDING WINTRY HONEY HOLES

It's far easier these days to locate the likely winter hideaways thanks to Google's satellite view imagery. Anywhere the water is clear at all—pretty much all of Florida, for example, as well as in Albemarle Sound, Pamlico Sound, Mississippi Sound, Aransas Bay, Baffin Bay, Laguna Madre and others—you can see submerged creek channels (sea level rise has been going on for a long time), dredge holes and other areas deeper than the surrounding flats that are likely to become fishy refuges on the first cold fronts.

Where the water is not clear enough to see into it via Google, many areas are covered by NOAA's charting service, and those charts can now be viewed for free at nauticalchartsonline.com. Note that there are offshore charts, which won't help you in this pursuit, and inshore charts, which will. The depth markings are not so complete as to show you tiny inshore potholes, but they're helpful in finding dredged channels, spoil holes and other likely winter refuges for gamefish.

While an airboat can help, judicious operation of most flats boats can also put you on most fishy spots, even on the lowest tides.

TIMING IT RIGHT

The fish are likely to be most concentrated when a front blows hard out of the north for a couple of days. This not only rapidly chills the water, but also pushes the water out, making the low tides much lower than normal, further channeling the fish into the remaining deep spots. And on the new- and full-moon low tides, about two days on either side of the peak, the low tides will be the lowest of the month. So, if you hit a trifecta—a big cold front, strong north wind and lowest low tide—you can be sure that a lot of inshore gamefish are going to corral up in the remaining deep spots.

The best action usually occurs in the first month or so of chilly weather. That's because the fish in the holes have not been picked over by other anglers early

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Visit the right spot and you can find plenty of keeper specks in winter, along with some jumbos.

on, and they're usually eager to bite. November and December are prime time in most areas of the Southeast, with the action progressively slowing after that through February.

HOW TO CATCH 'EM

Typical inshore spinning gear is ideal for winter fishing—a 7-foot, medium-light rod, 2500-sized reel and 10- to 15-pound-test braid does the job. A bass-sized baitcaster on a 6-foot 6-inch rod is also fine if you prefer a revolving spool. As always, you'll want a couple feet of fluorocarbon or monofilament leader—15-pound-test for trout and reds, 25-pound-test if snook are the target.

In addition to the D.O.A. Shrimp, Z-Man DarterZ and MirrOlure 52M or 65M, you might want to bring along an assortment of 1/8- to 3/8-ounce jig heads and basic plastic shrimp or swimmer tails. Many of the holes are lined with oyster shell or rock, so you'll lose plenty of jigs, but they are effective for pretty much everything in winter.

I've also done well with the Berkley Gulp! Alive! Shrimp, both on a jig and fished on a bare hook like live shrimp, in the winter potholes.

When it comes to live bait, shrimp rules. In fact, putting just a sliver of fresh-cut shrimp about the size of a pencil eraser on the hook of a plastic-tailed jig can greatly boost your catch, though it may also cause you to catch any marine catfish that are lurking in the holes.

My favorite way to fish shrimp in winter is to put a size 1/0 short-shank hook through the last joint in the tail and fish the bait unweighted anywhere the water is less than 4 feet deep. This is particularly effective around boat docks where the large props of inboard engines may have blown out a hole as the boat maneuvers to dock. Rest assured, redfish and sheepshead love spots like this. Use just a section of shrimp tail for the sheepies—they'll rob you blind if you fish whole shrimp.

For deeper water, you'll need to add split shot or a twist-on sinker just above the leader—the fish mostly hug the bottom during the fronts because that's where the water is warmest, so your bait needs to get down there.

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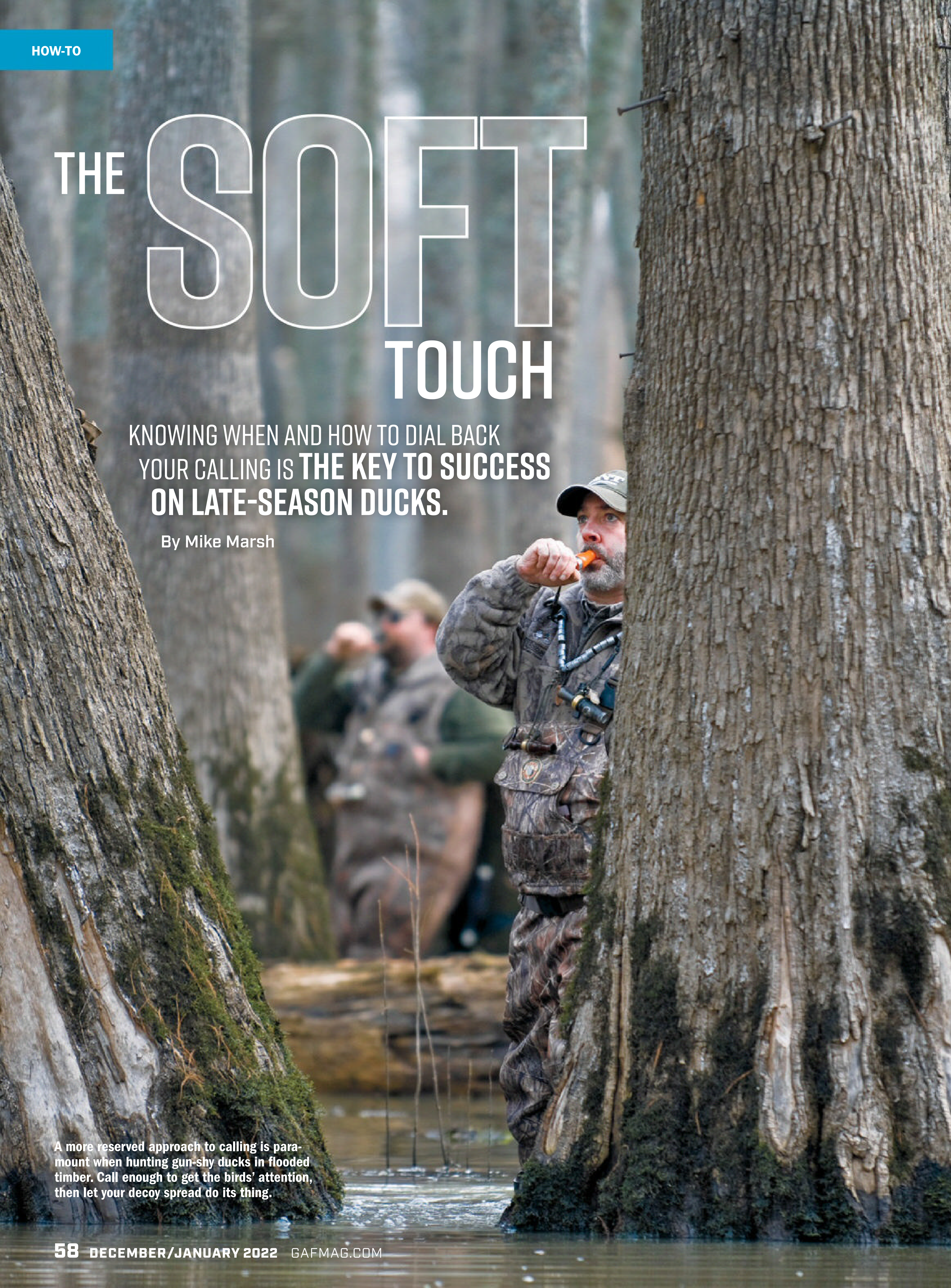
THE SOFT TOUCH

KNOWING WHEN AND HOW TO DIAL BACK YOUR CALLING IS **THE KEY TO SUCCESS ON LATE-SEASON DUCKS.**

By Mike Marsh



A more reserved approach to calling is paramount when hunting gun-shy ducks in flooded timber. Call enough to get the birds' attention, then let your decoy spread do its thing.

Years ago, my first trip to Arkansas' legendary rice fields found me hunting a water storage reservoir used to fill the adjacent rice fields. It took several trips in a small boat with a mud motor to ferry the dozen hunters to the blind, after which the boatman returned to the bank.

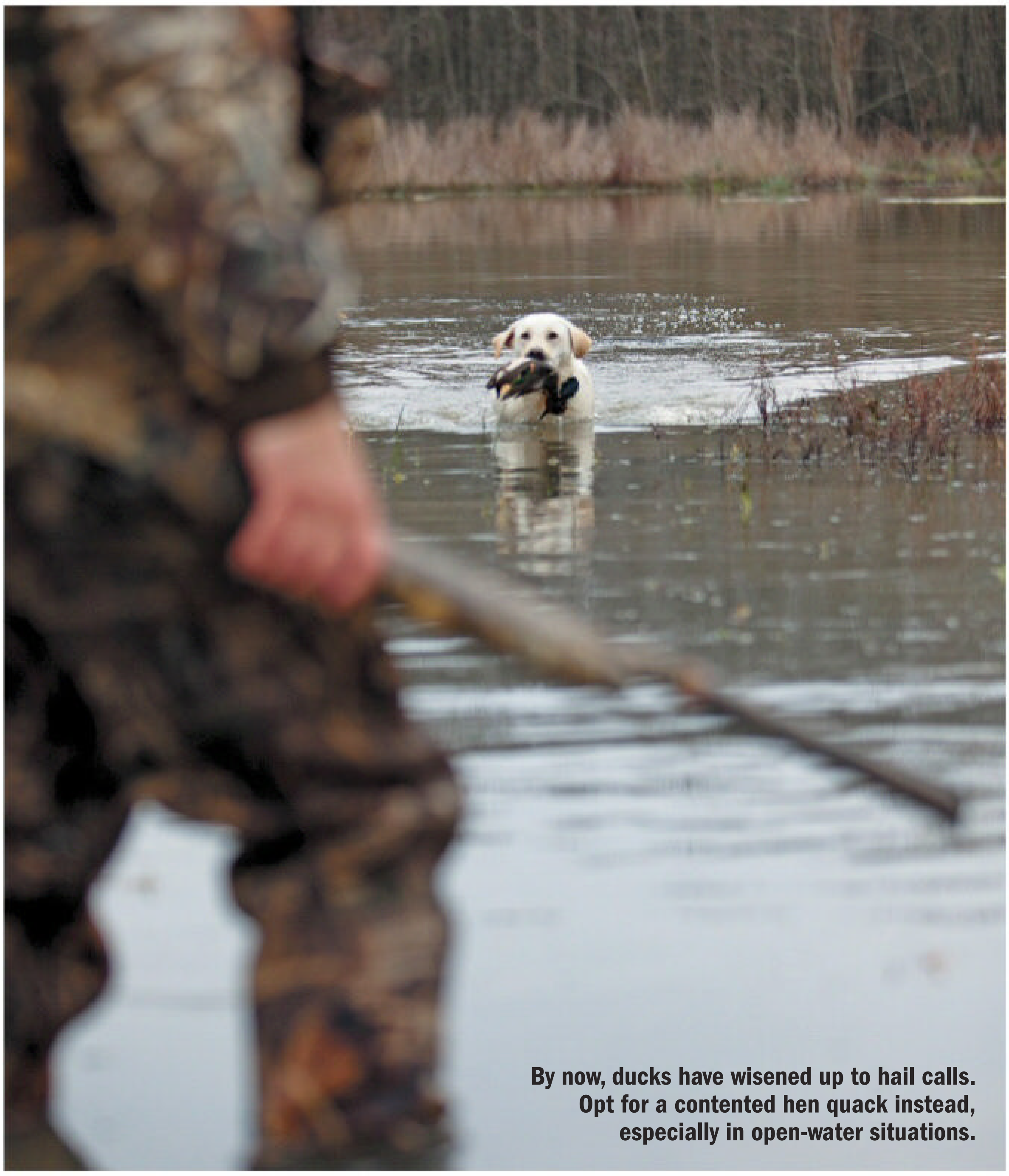
The hunting party included a guide and his friend, who was also a member of the club that leased the blind. The friend served as our caller that morning, and he called loud and long at everything that flew. Technically, he was an excellent caller, but after I sat and watched flock after flock of hard-hunted, late-season mallards beat wings in hasty retreat, I eased him off to one side.

"Do you realize you're scaring the ducks?" I asked.

"I'm a champion caller," he said. "That's what everyone wants to hear—championship calling."

Obviously, the ducks did not. By late morning we managed a meager bag of birds before the guide phoned the boatman, who returned to take the hunters back to the bank in shifts. The guide and the champion caller were in the first boatful to leave. Each time the boatman returned, he asked if we shot anything. The first time, it was with an amused smile and a chuckle at what he thought was a rhetorical question ... until the hunters loaded several ducks into the boat.

His smile had disappeared by the time I climbed in with the final boatload, carrying a game strap heavy with fowl. I had called in singles and small flocks between each of his return trips, and the remaining hunters added ducks to their bags. When everyone was ashore and counting ducks, he didn't quite seem to know what to think about me, the client who had out-called his champion caller buddy. In that final 30 minutes, the hunters remaining behind had bagged twice the ducks as the entire party had during the prime morning hours.



By now, ducks have wisened up to hail calls. Opt for a contented hen quack instead, especially in open-water situations.

BILL BUCKLEY (LEFT); RUSSELL GRAVES (RIGHT)

CORRECT CALLING

My success in luring those gun-shy ducks came from calling just enough to get their attention. Then, when they were close enough to be influenced by the dozens of decoys that remained in place, I stopped calling.

Later, my wife met one of the other hunters who had been in the blind, a publisher of a major duck hunting magazine.

"Mike's a heck of a caller," he told her.

Well, I am a relatively good caller, but by no means an "expert." My calling expertise is knowing when *not* to call, and that knowledge is rooted in my thousands of mornings spent hunting ducks over the decades. My ability lies in being able to read ducks and how they fly or answer hunters' calls. Calling ducks into shooting range is a far different thing than calling to impress judges.

Famous sporting scribe Jim Casada wrote that his turkey hunting mentor, Parker Whedon, once gave him some sage advice on calling turkeys.

"Get a gobbler's attention, then lay a heavy dose of silence on him," Casada wrote.

This, too, is great advice for a duck hunter. Sometimes it's best to stop calling altogether and let those expensive, carefully placed decoys work their magic.

Here, we'll look at how to make various calls when hunting late-season ducks.

THE HAIL

The hail, or greeting, call is a short series of moderately loud, descending notes, with most hunters blowing four to six notes. Some hunters tongue a lower introductory note into the call as though they are blowing a clarinet or other woodwind. If you are guilty of this, get that first low note out of your hail call because real ducks do not make it. Start the first note loud, clear and high, blowing the rest down in scale.

Some hunters blow many more notes and call extremely loud if ducks are far away, even when they are too far away to hear. It is better to start with low-volume hail calls and increase the volume with subsequent calls until ducks turn toward the decoys.

Over-calling is the term used when you continue calling until the ducks have heard enough to alarm them, or you make a mistake and they subsequently flare away. In places with lots of pressure, such as public waterfowl impoundments where other hunting parties within earshot are also calling ducks, it's best to call quietly or not at all. Competition with other hunters is not only rude, it beats ducks up in the moment and educates them to the point that simply hearing any loud call can send them on their way.

THE COMEBACK

This urgent, rapid, multiple-note call can be loud or soft, depending upon the proximity of the ducks. The closely spaced notes are a pleading or a command for ducks that have flared away from your decoys to return.

For most hunters, it is a moderate to loud call. However, blowing low-volume notes usually works best, especially in the latter part of the season when ducks have heard everything from hunters. When hunters blow comeback calls, ducks are typically closer than

CUSTOM QUACKING

Using a custom call will elevate your duck hunting experience.

Ralph Jensen (above) of R.H. Jensen Game Calls (rhjensengamecalls.com) handcrafts custom calls from rare woods, adorning them with personalized carvings and special inlays. Naturally, they are more expensive than mass-produced calls. However, any dedicated waterfowler can benefit from a custom call.

A custom-call maker like Jensen listens to the hunter's needs and calling techniques over the phone, then tailors a call's sound to the customer's particular style. For example, certain call reeds work better for making feeding calls and soft quacks for close-quarters timber shooting, while others work better for producing loud hail calls necessary for open-water hunting. Jensen also services his calls, including making repairs, tuning reeds and touching up carvings if they become worn by heavy use.

When hunting in areas where pintails, wood ducks or wigeon may be encountered, whistle calls can be effective for greenheads that have grown wary of mallard vocalizations.

BILL BUCKLEY (MAIN); MIKE MARSH (ABOVE)

SMALL PACKAGE, BIG LIGHT

Streamlight's Pocket Mate USB puts powerfully bright light at your fingertips.

Readily accessible, reliably bright light for outdoor adventures is a valued commodity. The ability to immediately illuminate the darkness can save a hunt and make it safer and more enjoyable. Streamlight's Pocket Mate USB ($29.99; streamlight.com) is a microlight that clips onto a call lanyard, rainsuit zipper, backpack or hat bill.

The CNC-machined aluminum body, with its stout integrated snap hook, features a polycarbonate lens and shockproof LED (50,000-hour lifecycle). An onboard lithium-polymer battery charges via a provided USB cord, offering a 1-hour runtime on low (45 lumens) and a 20-minute runtime on high (325 lumens). A handy illuminated charge indicator is housed under the on/off switch, providing a visual indication of the charge status (charge time is 4 hours).

An oversized, recessed on/off switch eliminates accidental activations and is easy to find and operate in the dark. It is a welcome deviation from the tiny switches found on comparable lights. The Streamlight Pocket Mate is IPX4 weather-resistant, making it the perfect companion for inclement conditions.

The Pocket Mate USB, like all Streamlight products, is a quality light, one thoughtfully engineered with attention to manufacturing detail that is evident throughout its build. It weighs just half an ounce, comes in four colors (red, silver, pink and blue) and has a 24-month warranty. —Dr. Todd A. Kuhn

POCKET MATE

they are at hail-call range. The best tactic is not overcalling. Once the ducks have turned toward your decoys, shut up and watch them. If they turn away again, hit them with another low-volume comeback call.

THE QUACK

The most underutilized yet arguably most effective call is the simple hen quack. Rather than a hail or comeback call, try the quack of a contented hen when you first spot a single duck or a flock. If it gets their attention and the ducks come toward your decoys, stop calling and let them come.

In areas where other hunters are present, loud hail or comeback calls tell other hunters that you have spotted some ducks. Their usual response is to begin hammering them with loud hail calls, whether or not they've seen the ducks you're calling to.

This almost certainly creates an overcalling situation that ends up pushing ducks away from the area. If you only give a low quack or two, other hunters may not hear it, and even if they do, they'll probably ignore it, thinking you were merely testing your call or warming it up.

When blowing quacks, use low volume first, then increase the volume until it gets the ducks' attention. Once they home in on the decoys, be quiet. If they turn away again, you can always call to them again. If you are quiet, they may also answer quietly enough that nearby hunters can't hear them.

THE FEED

It would seem the feed, or chuckle, is so much fun to blow that novice hunters simply cannot use it enough. While overused by beginners, the chuckle is the perfect complementary call to someone who is blowing hail or comeback calls. It can also be mixed with quacks as a subtle call, which other hunters close by may not be able to hear.

The feed call, blown by saying *ticket, ticket, ticket* rapidly into the mouthpiece, can be frustrating to learn and hard on the ears of other hunters if the caller is not up to the standard of a real mallard hen. Blowing it too often or too long can also wear out the tongue.

The most important aspect of making the feed call is picking the right call. A single-reed is typically better for making the feed call than a multiple-reed. Carrying an extra call dedicated to making only the feed vocalization is a good idea.

Once ducks respond by answering your feed calls or turning toward the decoys, stop calling and prepare to shoot. If they flare away, you can always hit them with the feed call again or the comeback call if that fails.

THE OTHERS

A mallard call can be used to imitate the calls of several diving duck species by growling into the call to make a *brrrr* sound. Mallards may also respond to this call if you set up a multi-species decoy spread.

A mallard drake call is also worth using as a quiet, close-quarters call. It works especially well when ducks have become call-shy of hen vocalizations.

Wood duck, wigeon and pintail whistles should also be on your lanyard when these species are likely to be encountered. They are proven to attract call-shy mallards to decoys.

CALLING ETIQUETTE

If your calling isn't up to snuff, get your buddies to critique it or record your calls and listen to them. Practice at home, not in the marsh, so you don't flare ducks or irk other hunters nearby.

When in the blind, choose one person to be the call leader. The leader is usually the best caller, the most experienced hunter or the one who invited you on the hunt. The lead caller sounds off first to any ducks seen or heard, while others complement his calls as instructed. A good leader will know the calling competency of his blind mates before the hunt begins.

The lead caller may ask you to chime in with hail or comeback calls when he is calling ducks at long distances. He may also ask you to blow feed calls or contented quacks when ducks are getting close. Competing with the lead caller is impolite. If he's really good, keep your call in your coat, listen and learn.

Otherwise, you run the risk of overcalling ducks, blowing an opportunity or embarrassing yourself. Worse, you can make your host angry and not be invited back. During the hunt recounted in the introduction to this article, I never took my call from my coat until the guide had left the blind.

HOG HEAVEN

American literature professor and acclaimed author Joseph Campbell once wrote, “The big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty ‘yes’ to your adventure.” His take on adventure has always been foundational to my relentless, often spontaneous, pursuit of it.

As an ardent hunter, the experiences are what I’m after—and the more, the merrier. I’m a sample-platter kind of guy. That is, if you’re offering, I’m sampling. A recent trip to the newly established Three Curl Outfitters lodge, near Avalon, Texas, revealed a destination offering a wide variety of adventure for those visiting there. And it proved that hog hunting heaven resides in the Lone Star state.

SWINE-SATIONAL

The trip was billed as a chance to field-test Hornady’s new 6mm ARC 103-grain ELD-X ammunition on feral hogs, and Three Curl Outfitters was the proving ground. The Three Curl operation (threecurl.com) was selected because of its stellar reputation for putting clients in front of feral hogs—the nemesis of ranchers and farmers across the state. With over 500,000 acres of property to hunt, the opportunities to lob lead at a pack of pigs are seemingly limitless.

Night hunting is the method of choice for feral hog hunts at Three Curl, offering hunters a unique, lights-out adventure under the stars. It also improves the odds of slipping in close and going undetected. Our two nights afield would prove successful, producing a healthy stack of swine; however, it was our last long stalk that proved most memorable.

THREE CURL OUTFITTERS IS A FULL-SERVICE TEXAS HUNTING OPERATION THAT SPECIALIZES IN PUTTING CUSTOMERS ON PLENTIFUL PIGS.

By Kevin Reese

Three Curl Outfitters offers hunters the opportunity to chase hogs on more than a half-million acres of private property.

RUSSELL GRAVES

THE TRUDGE

On our last night in camp, in the wee hours of morning, our guide, Corey Bradford, spotted a large sounder of hogs rooting up a wheat field about 800 yards away from the "Pig Rig"—the lodge's specially-equipped Chevy Suburban. Bradford gathered our group and quickly devised a game plan.

Texas had received record rainfall prior to our arrival in camp, transforming the typically dusty landscape into a super-sized mud bog. For expediency and safety, each hunter would follow Bradford in single file as he navigated through the darkness via his thermal imaging binoculars.

Upon stepping foot into the wheat field, we quickly sank up to our ankles. The Texas terra firma was anything but, transformed by the torrential rains and now the consistency of stale chocolate pudding that had been churned with a generous amount of super glue. Needless to say, it was a challenge to remain in our rubber boots and upright in the super slop. After a 20-minute trudge, we'd narrowed the gap and paused to catch our breath before setting up for the carnage. However, the sounder had disappeared over a slight rise and down into a wash surrounded by a heavy thicket, so off we went again.

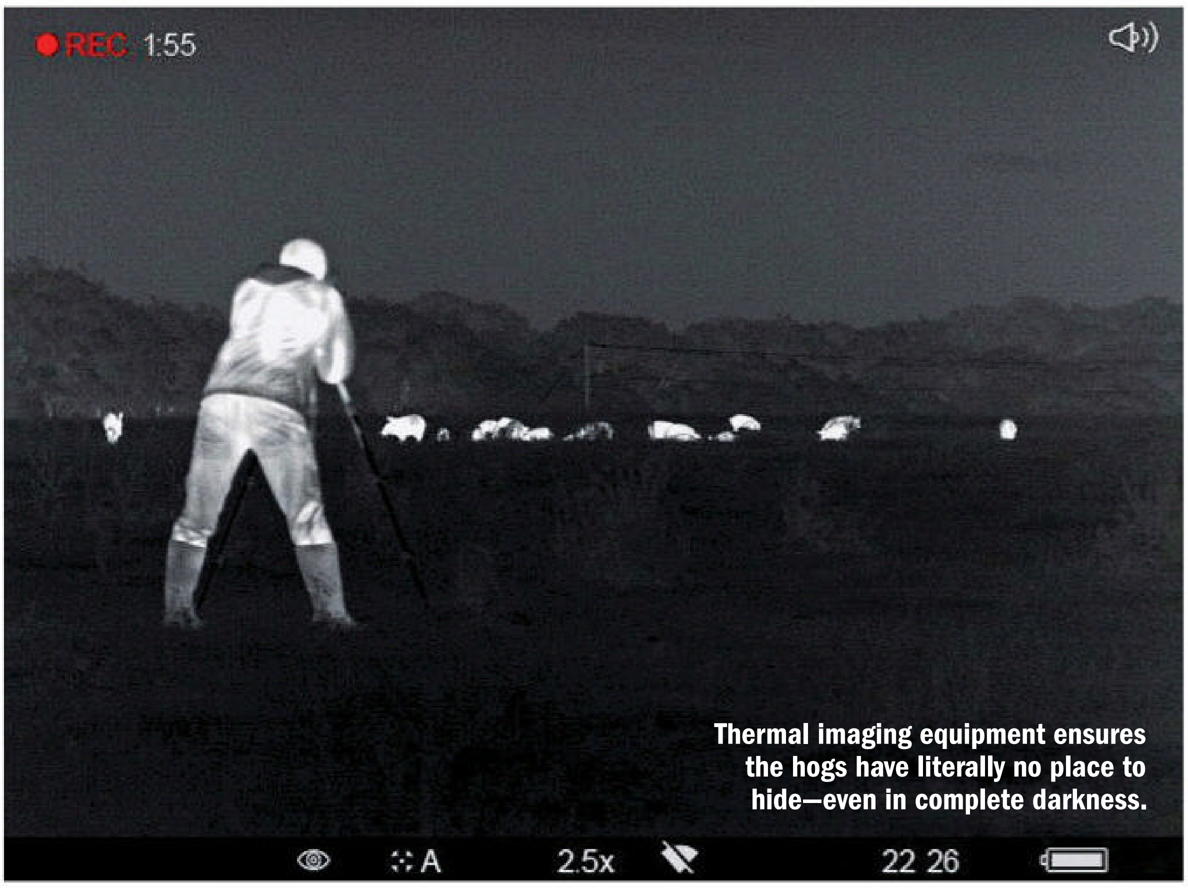
We slogged another 100 yards, now 900 or so from the truck, finding the sounder once again on the far side of the wash and heading up the opposite embankment. We were now just 50 yards from them, but they were skittish, likely from the noise of our small detail pushing through the field edge's impossibly tall grass and unruly briars.

As quietly as we could, we set up our tripod gun rests, powered on our thermal sights and set our crosshairs on the pigs in the brush. I chose a sow on the left, another hunter settled on one in the middle and a third rested his reticle on the ear of one to our right.

Bradford slipped behind us, tapping each of us on the shoulder, and whispering, "Ready?" Each of us countered, "Ready." Bradford then made the count. "Three, two, one."

At one, we each triggered our weapons, initiating a one-sided fire fight. The semi-autos barked, each shooter crumbling one hog then moving to the next candidate target.

When the proverbial "dust" (of which there was absolutely none) settled, we'd leveled most of the hogs in the pack, with a few stragglers ambling off into deeper cover. It was now pushing 3 a.m. and none of us were interested in another protracted slog through that mud, so we called it a night. A great night, indeed. The Hornady ammo, with its light recoil, had proven incredibly effective on feral hogs.



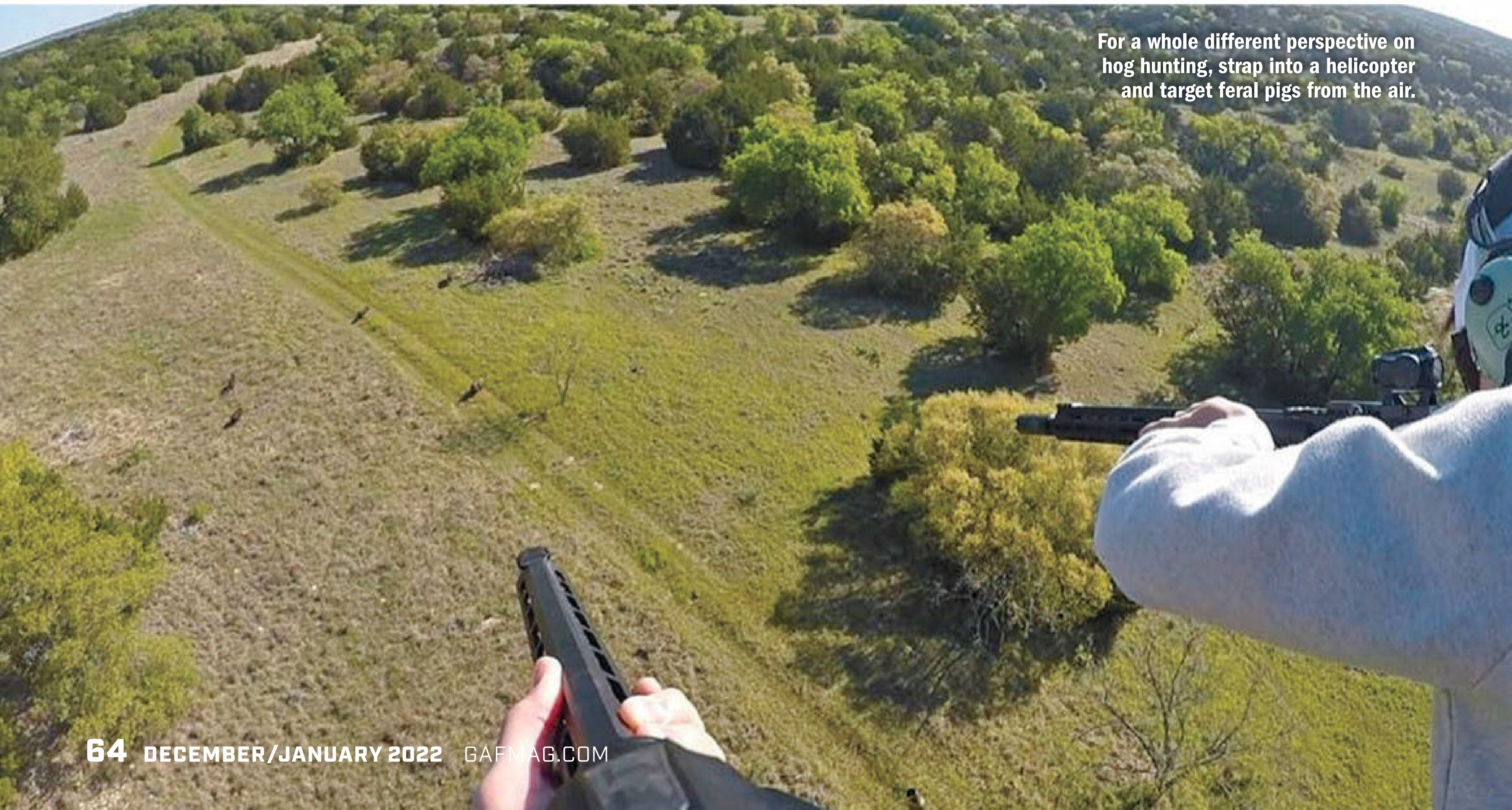
Thermal imaging equipment ensures the hogs have literally no place to hide—even in complete darkness.

OPPORTUNITIES APLENTY

With more than 500,000 combined acres of land to hunt hogs—either on the ground or from above in a helicopter— options abound to satisfy any hog hunting enthusiast. Numerous properties accommodate still-hunters equipped with either rifle or bow, day or night, as well as those who prefer to sit in a stand or blind.

If you haven't tried it, nighttime hunting provides for an altogether different and incredibly exciting adventure. As we experienced, the post-sunset spot-and-stalk hunt over open crop fields with semi-automatic AR-platform rifles and thermal riflescopes is a favorite among Three Curl's clients. A word to the wise if you plan to do a night hunt: Bring along plenty of energy drinks to stay awake and sharp into the wee hours.

Predator hunting is also available at Three Curl. Hunters often harvest predators while hog hunting; however, if you'd rather hunt predators exclusively, Three Curl can put you on them. Coyotes, bobcats, foxes and even cougars call rural Texas home. Hunting with Three Curl's Pulsar thermal imagers means nothing can hide, day or night.



For a whole different perspective on hog hunting, strap into a helicopter and target feral pigs from the air.

Game & Fish South Regional Editor Dr. Todd A. Kuhn dropped this spotted hog on a recent nighttime stalk with Three Curl Outfitters.

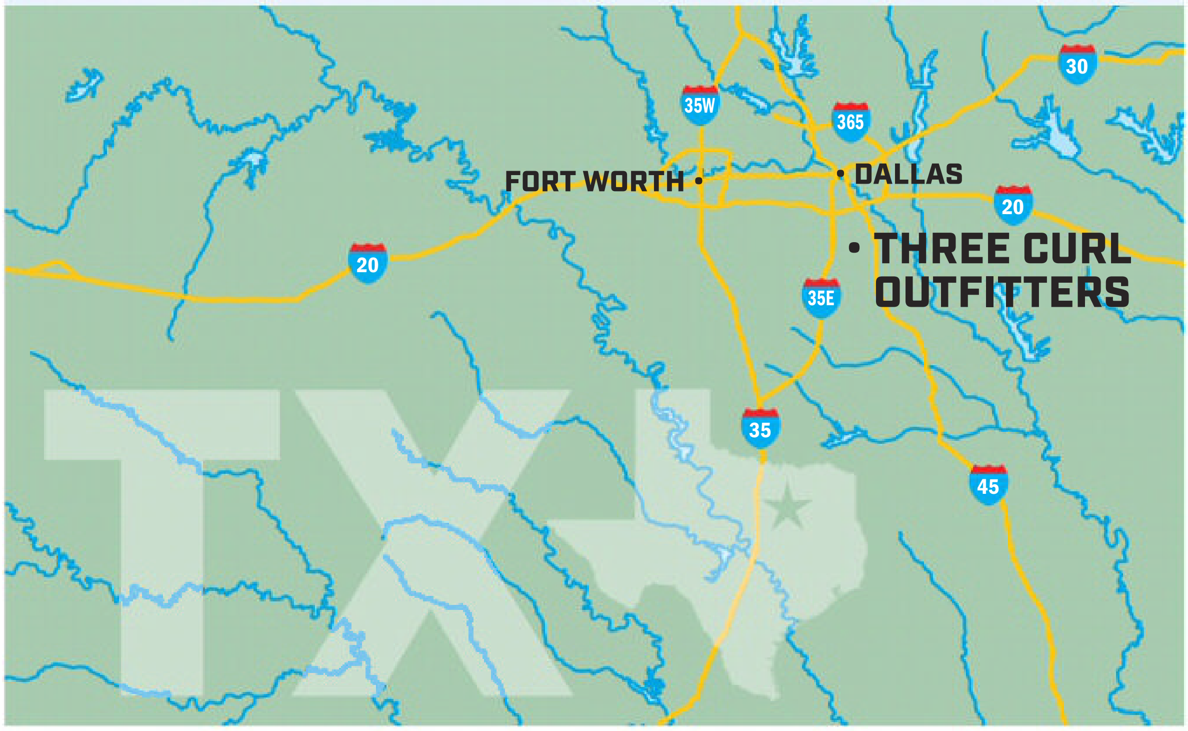
WHILE YOU'RE THERE

Things to see and do in the area

With the Three Curl Outfitters lodge nestled in the heart of Ellis County, about an hour south of Dallas, the surrounding area offers plenty of attractions. Texas is famous for its county courthouses, and the one in Waxahachie is well worth visiting. Across the street from the courthouse is a building erected in 1889 that now houses the Ellis County Museum and a treasure trove of Texas history.

The Waxahachie Creek Hike and Bike Trail offers four miles of creekside and wooded trails steeped in Texas' natural beauty. Also close to the lodge, along Highway 287, the Texas Motorplex racetrack welcomes drag racing fans. Scores of drag racing records have been set on the concrete track.

For springtime visitors, Texas's famed bluebonnets bloom in March and stick around through April. Not only is that a great time to hunt hogs, it's also a perfect time to visit the town of Ennis, known as the Bluebonnet City of Texas and home to the Bluebonnet Trail, which comprises 40 miles of mapped bluebonnet fields.



Three Curl Outfitters also offers world-class waterfowling opportunities and some of the best dove hunting in Texas, as well as quail and turkey hunting. Full hunting club and hunting lease options are also available and can include season-long, all-inclusive hunting adventures.

BEYOND THE HUNTING

In between hunts there is plenty to do at Three Curl Outfitters. Directly behind the lodge, guests enjoy clay target shooting via an automated thrower.

To the side of the lodge and stretching out over an expanse of open terrain lies a full shooting range, with handgunning targets, 50- and 100-yard sight-in lanes and additional targets out to 500 yards. This is the perfect place for plinking or preparing for an upcoming hunt.

Behind the shooting tables, guests can enjoy covered, close-range knife and tomahawk throwing, an activity ripe for friendly competition. On the other side of the covered area lies an additional tomahawk throwing area that allows throwers to put some respectable distance between themselves and the targets. On top of all this, and in true Texas fashion, there is some very good bass fishing available on the lodge property.

Simply put, Three Curl Outfitters is an outdoor enthusiast's playground, and one to consider when planning your next hunting adventure.

HELI-HUNTER (LEFT); KEVIN REESE (ABOVE LEFT, ABOVE RIGHT)

BIG BIRDS, BIG WATER, BIG EXPERIENCES

HUNTING SEA DUCKS OFF THE NORTHEAST COAST IS A **THRILLING, AND SOMEWHAT UNNERVING, ADVENTURE** FOR INLAND WATERFOWLERS.

By Alan Clemons

At some point you're just collecting thoughts in the twilight as eiders and scoters weirdly chatter and zoom overhead. Your shotgun is loaded and set, ammo box open and positioned by your thigh for quick access. Clothing is adjusted and readjusted because you're in thick layers sitting on your bottom in a two-man boat. You and your boatmate make sure you can shoulder your shotguns and swing with a couple of practice moves. You check the clock for the fourth or fifth time, making sure your phone is in the zippered chest pocket of your parka. All this finally ends, and then you and your boatmate sit quietly, listening, watching big birds flying, thoughts wandering in myriad directions.

During that time, if you're realistic, you think about being in a two-man boat gently riding the tide in a deep cove of the Atlantic Ocean. The mothership is hundreds of yards away. It's a quick zoom with a wide-open throttle but by then, you think, you'd be in the cold water and maybe flailing a bit. You scan the horizon, and those thoughts disappear. Stuff happens everywhere, all the time. You're in a two-man boat with a loaded Benelli Super Black Eagle waiting for official shooting time for one of the coolest experiences you've had in a lifetime of hunting waterfowl. Get ready for it.

If you're not geeked and a bit unnerved when thinking about what goes on out here, chasing sea ducks might not be for you. But if you're into our nation's history—sporting and founding—and want to experience new waterfowl hunting tactics and unique birds, I can tell you that hunting sea ducks off

A two-man layout boat is surprisingly stable in the chop of the Atlantic and effective at hiding hunters from eiders, scoters and other ducks.

ERIC CALL

the Northeast coast is something you should not miss. I've been in blinds and leaned against trees in Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee. This was one of the coolest hunts I've ever done.

Reilly McCue has been hunting ducks for about 40 years. He is in awe each morning. You hear guides who say they love their work. They love the grind and long hours. McCue does. He admitted that after about 20 years it's not as easy as it once was yet still is a thrill.

"It amazes me to hold these birds in my hands, knowing where they came from up north and what they've endured to migrate here each year," McCue said. The eiders, scoters, brant, long-tailed and other ducks breed far north of the shores of Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New York. They come each autumn from Thunder Bay, Nunavut, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and other faraway breeding grounds, just as mallards and teal wing their way from the Prairie Potholes.

"I want to ask them questions," McCue continued. "What they've seen, what they've experienced."

GEAR UP FOR SEA DUCKS

Plan accordingly for the weather conditions.

When we hunted in Massachusetts, the weather was pretty doggone stunning for December. No rain, wind or snow, sunny days and comfortable conditions. But being on the water always knocks a chill in your bones. And even though you watch weather forecasts it's not unusual to encounter a crazy wind or storm.

My base layers were merino wool **Icebreaker Tech top and bottom** (icebreaker.com) and **Swiftwick socks** (swiftwick.com). All are comfortable, not itchy and stay warm if wet. They also resist the odors of several days of hunting. I usually go one size up, and they're my first choice for winter hunting. Next came jeans, shirt, a **Sitka Fanatic hoodie** (sitkagear.com) and **Stormy Kromer Woolover jacket** (stormykromer.com). I topped off with a **Sitka fleece neck gaiter and GTX hat** for roaster warmth.

Over all this was a **Drake Waterfowl Refuge 3.0 3-in-1 jacket** (drakewaterfowl.com), which has a removable liner, multiple magnetic-snap pockets and roomy hood. Zippered chest pockets can hold phone, ammo, gloves or other gear, and fleece-lined pockets on the breast are positioned perfectly.

I also donned **Drake Waterfowl Guardian Elite waders,** which have an internal tearaway insulated liner. A belt cinches tight around your chest or belly, and a flexible front zipper is fantastic yet does not leak. The waders have three-layer breathable fabric, ample insulation, and reinforced boots, knees and seat. They're tough and comfortable.

Finally, do not forget to pack sunglasses. Sunlight and glare off the water is harsh, and they can ruin a day as much as the cold.

HUNTING IN AMERICA'S HISTORY

You can hardly toss a 3-inch shotgun shell around the Northeast, especially along the coast, without it hitting something steeped in history. When the country's pioneers landed they were smart enough to stay near water and head north from Plymouth, where ample seafood, wild game and mild summers awaited. Winter, of course, was a bit harsh, but they adjusted.

Our crew of hunters last December stayed in Hampton, N.H., which was founded in 1639. Just up the road is Portsmouth on the Piscataqua River, first explored in 1603 and founded in the 1620s. Boston was founded in 1630. Native Americans were here well before those settlers arrived, of course, in what is now the United States and Canada. The history runs deep for whatever avenue of interest you pursue.

As for waterfowling, that includes the earliest settlers learning likely hard lessons about tides and mud flats. Marshes with winding routes. Hitting waterfowl and seeing them skitter but keep flying, or fall to the water but dive out of sight. Those experiences still happen today, though over the 350 or so years of hunting ducks and geese we've learned more about strategy, hiding, blinds, ammunition and how to hunt. Our crew hunted near Gloucester and Salem, Mass., and the Merrimack River.

"You know, a lot of the places with the richest duck hunting are the places we settled long ago," McCue said. "Big harbors, protected bays ... we hunt down in Boston Harbor all the time. The islands down there have relics of forts and other structures, whether they're from way back in time or World War II. There's tons of history along the coastline of Massachusetts. We're close to an area where they had the witch trials.

"There's great waterfowling tradition here from years past. There is a lot to see and visit, along with knowing you're part of the history of waterfowl hunting. But it doesn't seem as if there are as many people doing it anymore, which is great for me."

ABOUT THE BOAT

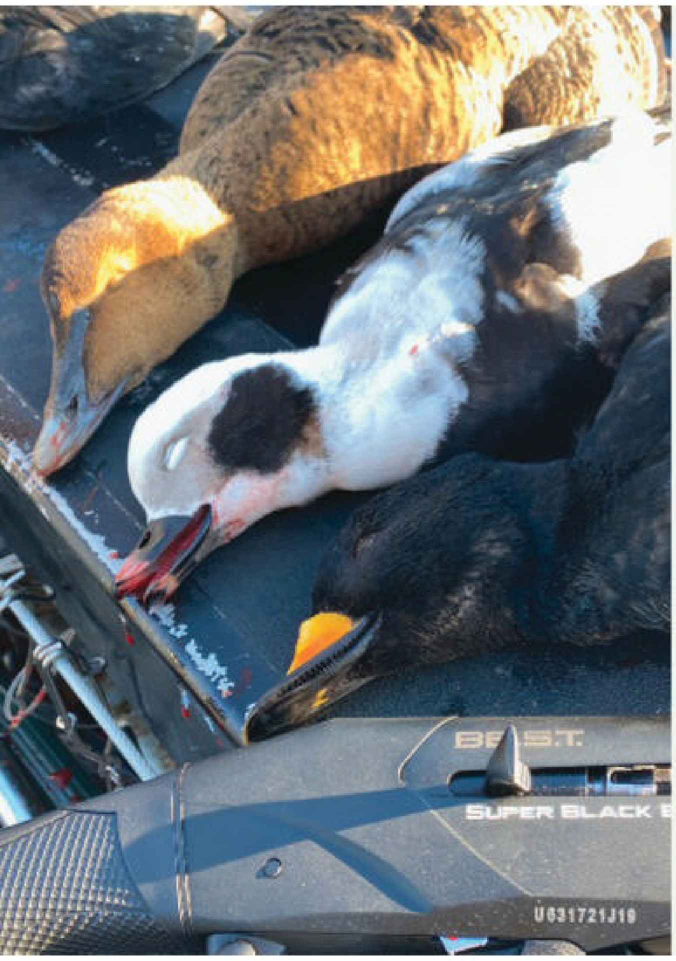
McCue has a regular routine that begins just before waterfowl season, and to the non-guiding world, it sounds pretty harsh. But it's how he stays on top of things and makes sure his hunters are in what he believes are the best places for ducks.

He's up every morning at about 2 o'clock to get ready. He checks the weather reports—again—and tides, and anything else relevant. His custom 25-foot Fab-Tech deep V-hull boat is ready to go: decoys in the side storage panels, clips and weights secured, gas in the 250 hp outboard, the Core Sound twin layout boat secured in the bow.

The latter is like a flying saucer with the dome removed and seats added. Two hunters can securely sit in it, shooting front and sides, without tipping. Our hesitation to roll over the gunwale into it quickly disappeared. McCue also hunts islands off the coast, but pointed out that he never puts clients on islands that will be covered by the tide. That's a recipe for potential disaster, he said.

Layout boats, sneak boats and similar blinds have been used for probably centuries in coastal areas. Low to the water, they afford camouflaged hunters the chance to sit back and become a blip on the surface. In the Southeast, they often are in marshy areas or agriculture fields and resemble coffins or sunken boxes. In the Northeast, you're on the water in a round rig like ours or maybe a floating box. All are effective techniques, provided you're in an area with ducks.

McCue's scouting throughout the season puts him in the prime locations for birds moving to the best feeding areas. These big pillow-sized eiders, scoters and other divers seek mussels and clams, repeatedly diving to eat and surfacing in the morning before a midday roost and



SALTWATER AND SHOTGUNS

A new treatment from Benelli blunts the impact of saltwater, mud and harsh conditions.

The new **Benelli Surface Treatment (Be.S.T.)** offers impressive protection against rust and abrasion, which we discovered with our Super Black Eagle 3 shotguns in Massachusetts. Post-hunt maintenance is much easier, too, and Benelli guarantees Be.S.T. with a 25-year warranty.

Benelli engineers worked for a decade to develop Be.S.T., a treatment that uses physical vapor deposition and plasma-enhanced chemical vapor deposition to apply diamond-like carbon particles to the gun's exposed metal surfaces. These particles are molecularly adhered to the metal through the intense vapor deposition process.

As with any waterfowl hunt, our gear got wet. Being in saltwater is more of a concern, but even after splashes, being knocked around in the boats and shoved into cases after the hunt, none of our shotguns experienced any issues. Saltwater can attack metal parts quickly. Our days ended midmorning before stowing the gear, returning to the ramp and then traveling to McCue's home to split up ducks. The guns spent more than half a day in saltwater conditions for three days straight, and yet no rust or malfunctions occured.

Benelli got it right. Unfortunately, older guns cannot be sent in to be treated due to the amount of work required. Benelli currently applies Be.S.T. to the Super Black Eagle 3, Ethos and Ethos Cordoba models, and the treatment may come to others (benelliusa.com).

ALAN CLEMONS (2)

rest. They may feed again before nightfall, where they will raft overnight in massive groups. The shellfish beds may shift a bit depending on river and tidal influences, but for the most part, they're historical areas the birds come to each year.

On the islands McCue said clients also may shoot mallards, scaup, mergansers, buffleheads and common goldeneyes. Unlike Arkansas, where greenheads rule and some hunters consider anything else to be trash, it's a wide-open menu on the coast.

McCue started hunting when he was about 9 years old, going with his father and uncles. They had a weekend getaway and would hunt the marshes. He's tried everything from big to small boats, layouts, wading in the marshes, blinds and sitting on the islands. He prefers hunting around the islands but will do whatever is best based on his scouting and the clients. After about 40 years of hunting and 20 of guiding, he may not have seen it all but he's come close.

"The [two-man] boat is just another way to get after them," McCue said.

Capt. Reilly McCue has spent 40 years hunting scoters and other sea ducks off the coast of Massachusetts.

READY FOR ACTION

B-100 MOSSY OAK® SHADOW GRASS® HABITAT™

B-100 MOSSY OAK® BOTTOMLAND®

B100
CAMO BOAT SEATS

Waterfowl hunters looking for maximum comfort, durability, and concealment in their boat seats need look no further than the Millennium Marine B-100 Camo Boat Seats available in Mossy Oak® Bottomland® and Mossy Oak® Shadow Grass® Habitat™ camouflage.

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MILLENNIUM MARINE

"We're using these layout boats because we're in an open bay where the birds are diving and feeding on clams and mussels. There's no way to get after them and hide effectively without using these layout boats. They're deadly.

"These mussel beds at low tide will be exposed or may be a couple of feet under. For a lot of these common eiders, the mussel beds they're feeding on are in 20 feet or less of water. These birds come back year after year, and the mussel beds or clam beds shift and change but generally are in the same places. With some of the abilities to put GPS on the birds and track them, biologists figured out that they return to the same areas. When you're considering your hunting locations you also have to account for the pressure you and other hunters might be putting on these birds all season long."

KEEP SHOOTING

We were eager to hunt after going through McCue's routine of off-loading and anchoring the two-man boat, then clipping weights on decoys attached to a main line that he set in front of the rig. Skeins of brown and black eider and scoter decoys bobbed along with some lines of handmade wooden decoys that looked like big yard ornaments. The size stands out to ducks flying far off. Ducks see lines of birds on the water and zoom by, often cartwheeling to land or making a loop before splashing down. McCue uses dark decoys on cloudy days and lighter ones on sunny days, often mixing dark and light depending on conditions and the birds.

We were shooting 12-gauge Benelli Super Black Eagle 3 shotguns loaded with 3-inch Kent Fasteel 2.0. Having shot sea ducks in Maine years ago, it was no surprise when McCue reiterated what we had heard on that trip long ago: If you hit a duck, shoot again and watch it fall because you may have to hit it again. These big ducks with thick feathers and down are tough, and they can take a smack or two. The "Woohooo!" shot you make may not be enough.

"With improvements in steel and chokes, you definitely can hunt with steel and not worry about the non-toxics," McCue said. "My favorite is probably a No. 2 or No. 3 load. It depends on how you're set up, too. We're set up with these birds coming within 40 yards of the decoy spreads, so some guys might want to shoot bigger and faster steel like BBs. But if you're trying to get them to decoy in, I think No. 2 probably is a good all-around load. If you use some of the more expensive non-toxics, No. 4 is ample. One thing about these sea ducks, though, is they don't like to die. They don't give up the ghost real easy. Gotta hit them hard."

We did, pounding the birds and celebrating the splashes. We laughed about some of the misses, and as waterfowlers often do, we looked confused with a few shots that didn't connect. Sea ducks are big but they fly quickly. Don't be fooled into thinking these little tanks are slow. You better have your A-game dialed in. After a flurry we would contact McCue on the walkie-talkie to come over, and the crew would net the birds from the mothership before moving several hundred yards away.

The ducks didn't seem to care about us shooting and moving, or the big boat. They would fly overhead, within range, land in the decoys, fly out, still buzz around after we shot, and then a few moments later we'd have another flurry. McCue watched from the big boat, communicating, taking photos of ducks with his Canon camera, and enjoying the moment. A woman on the beach, well away from us, watched birds and ducks through a spotting scope. The

The quaint, family-owned Lamie's Inn is a Hampton landmark built in 1740.

WANT TO GO?

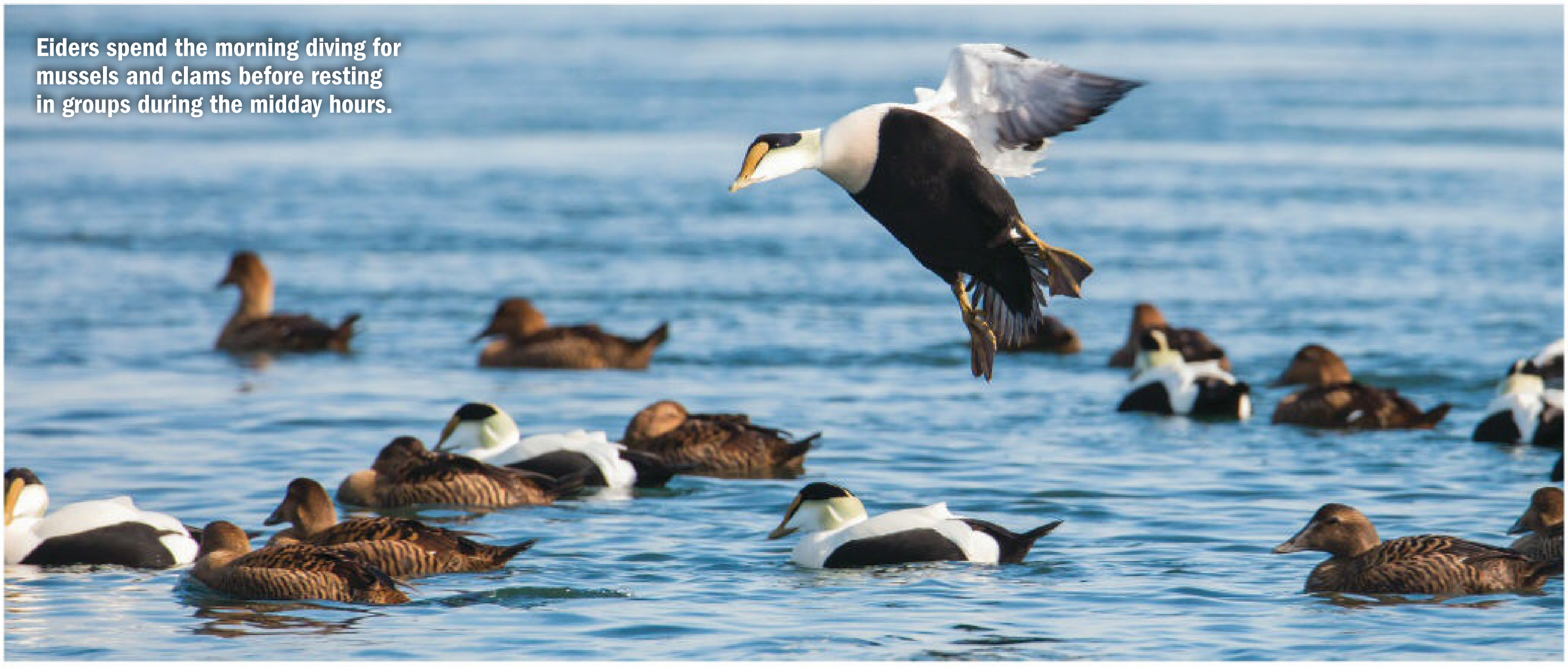
Sea ducks are the main draw in Massachusetts, but there are other attractions to fill an afternoon.

Veteran guide and U.S. Coast Guard captain Reilly McCue of RPM Outdoors (rpmoutdoors.com) runs trips out of harbors along the Northeast coast. He takes into account his scouting, weather, tides and what his hunters want to accomplish. McCue is stringent about safety, licenses and limits. He enjoys a good hunt but doesn't tolerate tomfoolery or unsafe actions.

I suggest staying at Lamie's Inn and Old Salt Restaurant (OldSaltNH.com) in Hampton, N.H. This charming inn welcomes hunters, as does the town, and has long been a part of the area's history. Rooms are comfortable, clean and quiet. At the Old Salt, be sure to get a cup of clam chowder, slab of haddock, and lobster mac and cheese. Wash it down with a Smuttynose Finestkind IPA or Old Dog Brown, an Allagash White or a Shipyard Prelude Winter Warmer.

Fly into Boston or Manchester, N.H., and drive over. If it's the former, work in some time to visit Revolutionary-era sites downtown and Fenway Park. Salem is famous for the witch trials, of course. Other possibilities include the SIG Sauer Academy in Epping, N.H., and the Kittery Trading Post in Kittery, Maine.

ALAN CLEMONS (LEFT); ERIC CALL (OPPOSITE)



Eiders spend the morning diving for mussels and clams before resting in groups during the midday hours.

coastline, even in winter, is one of the best birdwatching areas in the country.

McCue occasionally deals with anti-hunters at the boat ramps. He remains polite, explaining about the ducks, his scouting and birding year-round to help with biological surveys, and conservation issues. Some get it, some don't. He tries to be understanding. In spring and summer he often is in the woods doing biological counts of birds, fungus and insects. His beard gives him the appearance of an old salt, but his inner kid hunting marshes with his father and uncles never grew up.

"Like to do what we do and enjoy being outdoors," he said. "One of my lines in my life in general is I try to not let my good time negatively affect someone else's good time. There's a lot to do and enjoy, man, so let's just get along and enjoy it." G&F

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RUGER HAWKEYE PREDATOR

BALANCE AND PRECISION COMBINE IN A RIFLE WELL-SUITED FOR FURBEARERS AND VARMINTS.

By Richard Mann

COURTESY OF RUGER

Ruger Hawkeye rifles are the latest incarnation of Ruger's famous Model 77 bolt-action centerfire rifle design. The origin of the name "Hawkeye" is found in early American literature. It was the nickname of fictional hero Natty Bumpo, the lead character in James Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales." (Remember "The Last of the Mohicans?") Today, "Hawkeye" is commonly used to describe anyone who is an exceptional rifle shot. This all makes it a fitting name for an American-made hunting rifle.

I recently tested the newest rifle in the Hawkeye line. Called the Predator, it is available in four chamberings: .204 Ruger, .223 Rem., .22-250 Rem. and 6.5 Creedmoor. One version comes with an adjustable length of pull, and all but the .223 Rem. Hawkeye Predator have 24-inch barrels. Ruger gives the .223 Rem. rifle a 22-inch barrel. For me, the appeal of the Predator is the melding of a standard sporting-type rifle with a moderately heavy barrel, making it seemingly ideal for mobile, or "walking," varmint and predator hunting.

Like all Hawkeye rifles, the Predator utilizes a non-rotating, Mauser-type, controlled-round-feed extractor, has a hinged floor plate with an engraved Ruger logo, and a bolt-mounted three-position safety. Other shared features include a cold-hammer-forged barrel, integral Ruger scope bases, and a two-stage adjustable target trigger. Features unique to the Predator are a natural camo-like Green Mountain laminated hardwood stock, and a stainless-steel action and barrel with a matte finish. Additionally, though the Predator is not a heavy rifle, it does have a robust barrel. Just in front

RICHARD MANN

The Predator's hinged floorplate is secured by an unobtrusive, but easily accessible, latch built into the front of the trigger guard.

SPECIFICATIONS

RUGER HAWKEYE PREDATOR

ruger.com

TYPE: bolt-action centerfire rifle

CALIBER: .223 Rem.

BARREL: 22"; cold-hammer-forged stainless steel; medium contour; 1:9" twist rate

TRIGGER: two-stage adjustable; 3-lb. pull weight

SAFETY: three-position wing

MAGAZINE: internal box with hinged floorplate; 5-round capacity

SIGHTS: none, scope bases integral to receiver and Ruger rings included

FINISH: matte stainless steel

STOCK: Green Mountain laminated hardwood; 13 1/2" length of pull

OVERALL LENGTH: 42"

WEIGHT: 7.7 lbs.

MSRP: $1,359

of the action the barrel's diameter is 1.155 inches, and it gently tapers to a muzzle diameter of .676 inch.

For testing, I mounted a 3-10x42 mm Swarovski Z3 riflescope with a 1-inch tube in the matte stainless rings that came with the rifle. Since the current trend in riflescopes seems to be bigger is better, some discussion of the Ruger rings is in order. The rifle ships with Ruger No. 4 front and No. 5 rear rings, which are considered medium in height. Attached to the Hawkeye's integral scope bases, these rings positioned the 48 mm (external measurement) objective bell of the Swarovski .13 inch above the barrel. This is about ideal. If you were to mount a riflescope with a much larger objective bell, you'd probably need to order a No. 6 ring for the rear and use the No. 5 ring on the front. Doing so might push the centerline of the scope above the height desired for a comfortable cheek weld while shooting.

I went with a scope having a more traditional size and magnification range because, while this rifle proved long-range capable, I felt it best suited to snooping around the edges of pastures for groundhogs and setting up in the same locations to call coyotes. Both situations typically offer shots in the 100- to 300-yard range, and at those distances a 3-10X riflescope works well. In fact, after testing from the bench I conducted a good deal of shooting from unsupported field positions and from a Spartan Sentinel tripod. The rifle's perfect balance right between the hands at the front scope ring was optimum for that type of shooting as the results on target proved. Several three-shot groups from the sitting position at 100 yards measured right at an inch, and from the tripod, two of the 200-yard groups were about the same size.

I did not tinker with the Hawkeye's adjustable trigger. Out of the box it broke at exactly 3 pounds and was very crisp. Interestingly, Ruger describes it as a two-stage trigger with a short take-up stage. I could detect only an infinitesimal amount of first-stage movement, and as advertised there was no creep. It is a very good trigger—as good a factory trigger as I have pulled on a sporting-weight Ruger rifle—especially for off-hand shooting where most of the shooter's focus needs to be directed toward sight alignment.

I had only a single complaint with the rifle. As I've found with most Ruger Hawkeye rifles, out of the box the bolt seemed a bit rough. Experience with previous Ruger 77s and the more modern Hawkeye iteration has shown this roughness ebbs rather quickly. Ultimately, after several hundred rounds you end up with a bolt action that operates smoothly.

I also must mention that the test rifle in .223 Rem. weighed 7 percent more than the advertised 7.7 pounds. It's not unusual for factory weight specifications to be a bit off, they're generally averages as opposed to exacts, but a half-pound discrepancy is worth noting. Regardless, don't mistake the rifle's svelte appearance to mean it's a lightweight. The moderately heavy barrel is there for good reasons: to not heat up during volume fire and to help stabilize precision shooting in the field.

Ruger offers 10 different Hawkeye rifles suitable for hunting everything from prairie dogs to pachyderms. Several are available in 6.5 Creedmoor and two come chambered for the .204 Ruger. However, only the Predator version of the Hawkeye is available chambered for the .223 Rem. and 22-250 Rem., which are unquestionably two of the best predator hunting cartridges ever offered. The Predator also comes out of the box with a matte finish on all steel surfaces including the scope rings and a stock that's somewhat camouflaged. All it needs for stealthy predator hunting is a suitable riflescope and a good shooting sling.

I really liked this rifle and expect serious predator hunters will too; the Predator shoots very well, balances perfectly, and requires no aftermarket camouflage treatment for the field. In .204 Ruger it'll work just fine for gophers, groundhogs, bobcats and coyotes. The .223 Rem. and .22-250 Rem. options can do the same and work for deer with the right ammo where .22 centerfires are legal. With a Predator chambered in 6.5 Creedmoor, a hunter would have a rifle capable of taking care of all varmints and most big game. And like with all the other Ruger Hawkeye rifles I've tested, if there's any missing going on, the gun won't be to blame.

SHOOTING RESULTS

LOAD.......... Federal Premium Nosler Ballistic Tip
BULLET WEIGHT .... 55 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY .... 3,227 fps
AVERAGE GROUP .... 1.19"

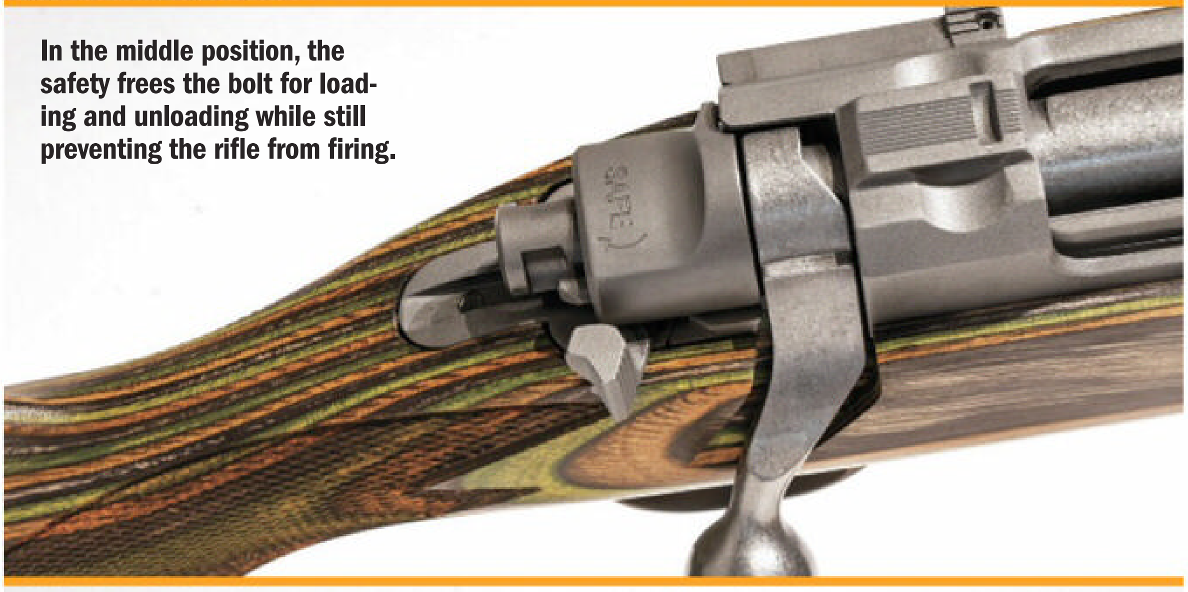
LOAD .... Nosler Flat-Base Tipped Varmageddon
BULLET WEIGHT .... 55 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY .... 3,105 fps
AVERAGE GROUP .... 0.70"

LOAD........... SIG Sauer Varmint & Predator
BULLET WEIGHT .... 40 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY .... 3,565 fps
AVERAGE GROUP .... 0.98"

Muzzle velocity is the average of 10 consecutive shots fired through a Caldwell G2 chronograph at 10 feet. Accuracy is the result of three consecutive, five-shot groups fired from a sandbag rest at 100 yards.

RUGER M77 HAW
712-59877
223 REM

Scope bases are integral to the receiver, and the rifle comes with Ruger rings.



In the middle position, the safety frees the bolt for loading and unloading while still preventing the rifle from firing.

The full-length, Mauser-style claw extractor retains cartridges for controlled-round feeding.

RICHARD MANN (3)

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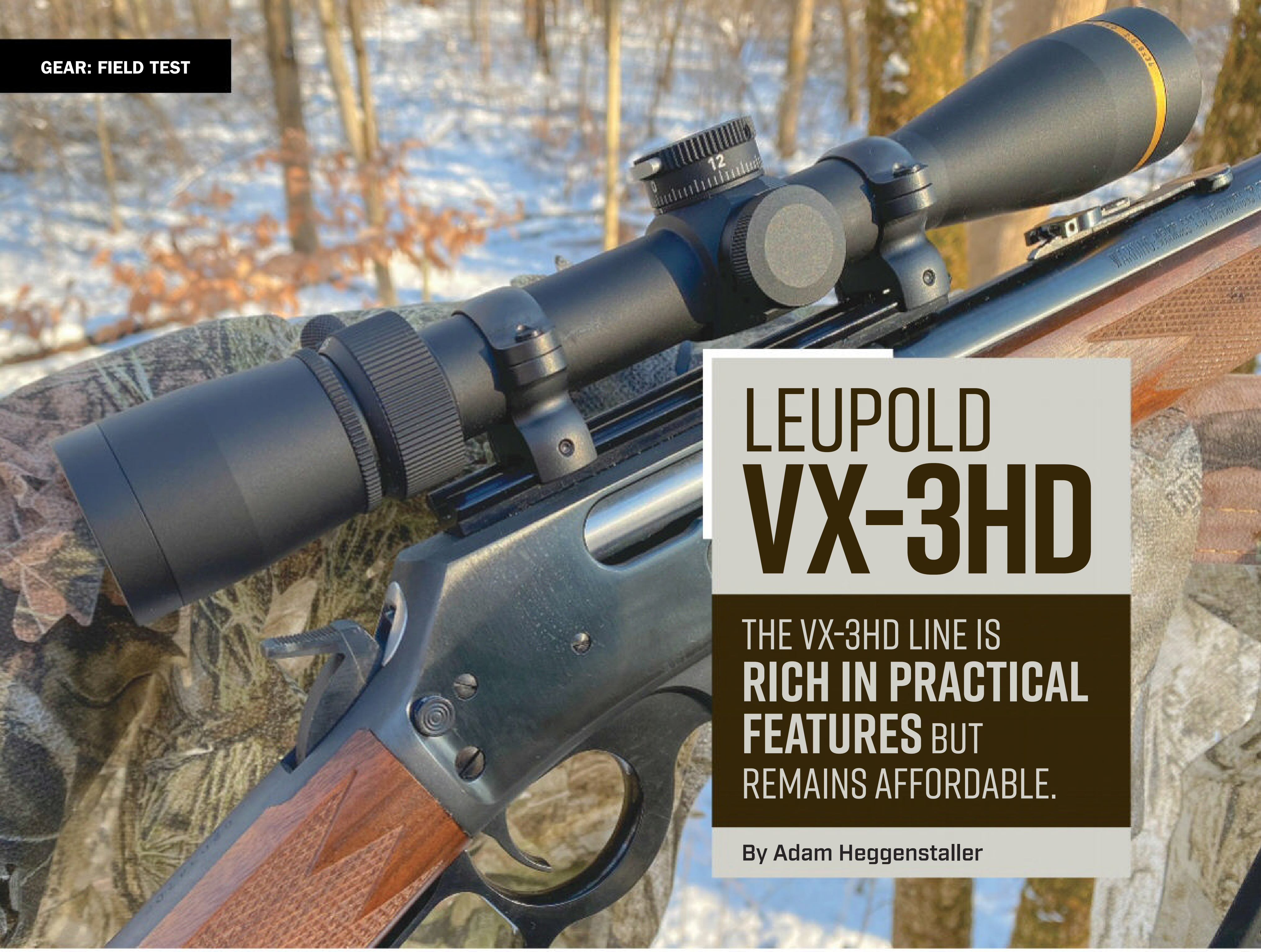


LEUPOLD VX-3HD

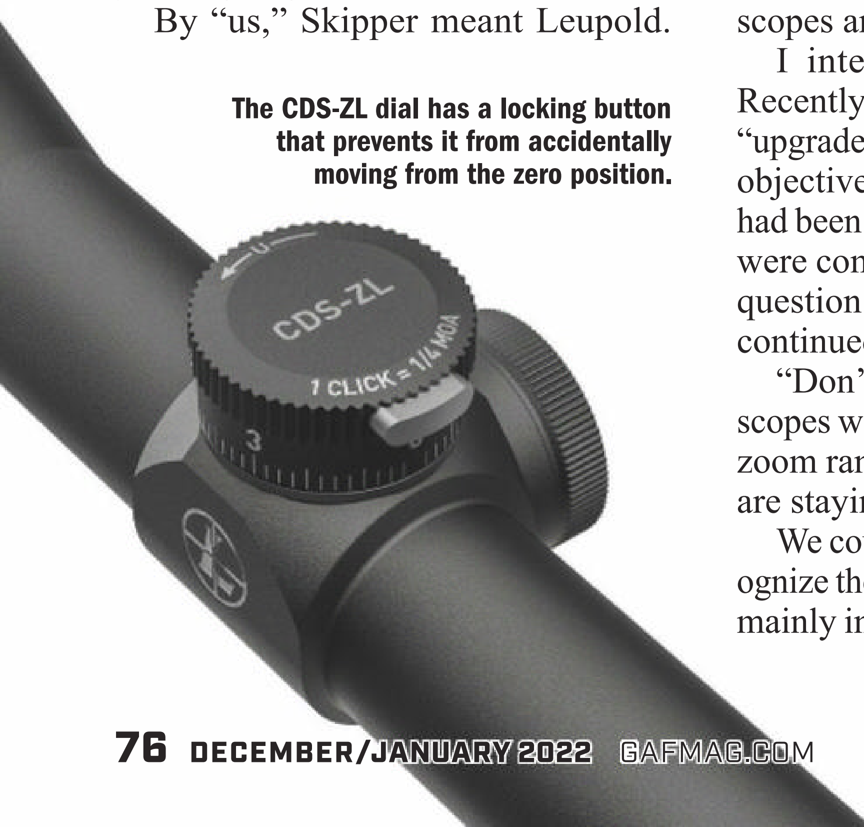
THE VX-3HD LINE IS **RICH IN PRACTICAL FEATURES** BUT REMAINS AFFORDABLE.

By Adam Heggenstaller

I could tell Shawn Skipper was excited, and it wasn’t because he had just returned from a successful elk hunt. (I think it was elk. Skipper hunts so much that it’s difficult to keep track.)

“Big news from us,” he said, “and you’re going to like it.”

By “us,” Skipper meant Leupold. He serves as the company’s industry relations manager and therefore keeps me abreast of the latest product developments coming from headquarters.



The CDS-ZL dial has a locking button that prevents it from accidentally moving from the zero position.

“We’re giving the VX-3i line a bunch of upgrades and calling it the VX-3HD,” he dutifully reported. “I know you’re a fan of the VX-3i, but these new HD scopes are even better—”

I interrupted him with a groan. Recently I’d come to notice that scope “upgrades” meant larger main tubes and objective lenses. Several VX-3i scopes had been favorites of mine because they were compact. Before I could pose the question I was afraid to ask, Skipper continued the conversation.

“Don’t worry, we’ll have a bunch of scopes with 1-inch tubes in the line. The zoom range and most of the objectives are staying the same.”

We could still be friends. While I recognize the benefits of 30 mm main tubes, mainly increased adjustment capability and a larger magnification range, I don’t find them necessary for the majority of my hunting. The tradeoff of a larger, heavier and in some cases quite bulky scope aren’t worth the extra clicks and power. Call me old-fashioned; I like 1-inch scopes on hunting rifles.

I ordered the 2.5-8x36 mm VX-3HD, and I’ve hunted with it on bolt-action rifles and lever guns for almost a year now. Skipper was right; Leupold did upgrade the line in several ways while keeping it practical and affordable.

The VX-3HD scopes are built around Leupold’s Elite Optical System, which considers every aspect of the view presented by the scope. The glass formula, arrangement of the lenses and their coatings are all taken into account when assembling the scope. The result is not only better light transmission in low light, but also improved clarity, resolution and glare reduction. The Elite Optical System “handles” the available light

ADAM HEGGENSTALLER (TOP)

and makes it most useful to the eye. In addition, the VX-3HD has Leupold's Guard-Ion lens coating to protect the exterior glass surfaces from dirt and debris while helping them shed water.

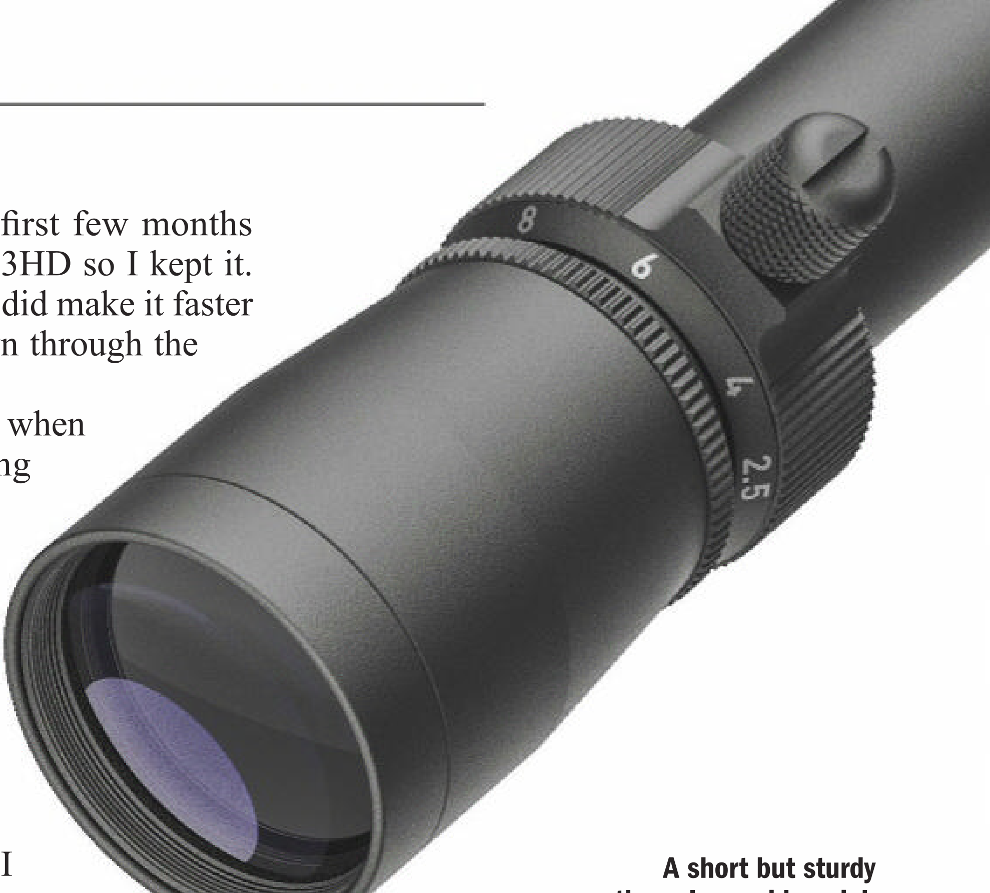
One of the most notable upgrades is the VX-3HD's CDS-ZL elevation-adjustment dial. The Leupold Custom Dial System (CDS) has been available for about 10 years now, and it keeps getting better. Provide the company with load, rifle and environmental data, and it will etch a dial with marks that correspond to the elevation adjustments needed for various ranges. Instead of having to look at a drop chart and count clicks to make the necessary adjustment, simply turn the dial to the number that denotes the range to the target (3 for 300 yards, 3.5 for 350 yards, and so on). It's a slick, practical system that eliminates guesswork while in the field—as long as you provide Leupold with solid data—and I've made good use of it while hunting elk, mule deer and coyotes.

The ZL portion of the dial's name refers to the ZeroLock function, and this is where the VX-3HD receives an improvement. Built into the rear of the dial near its top is an oval button. When the button is engaged, the dial is locked at the zero position to prevent accidental movement. Unlocking it simply requires pressing the button with your thumb while you pinch the dial to make an adjustment. It's a small but very notable enhancement that offers peace of mind.

The CDS-ZL dial isn't useful only for 300-yard-plus shots. Hunters using muzzleloaders, slug guns and centerfire rifles chambered in straight-wall cartridges all can benefit from having elevation marks at closer distances. And they can get this advantage in reasonably sized VX-3HD scopes.

While the 2.5-8x36 mm hits a sweet spot for deer hunting, there is a 1.5-5x20 mm VX-3HD and several higher-power models up to 6.5-20x50 mm. Interestingly, the standard 3-9x40 mm configuration is absent from the line. Leupold offers a 3.5-10x40 mm VX-3HD instead.

Most VX-3HD scopes come with a checkered, cylindrical throw lever that mounts to the magnification ring for quick changes in power. I'll admit I had planned on removing the throw lever to maintain the scope's streamlined shape, but its low profile didn't get in the way during the first few months that I tested the VX-3HD so I kept it. Plus, the lever really did make it faster to zoom up and down through the magnification range.



A short but sturdy throw lever aids quick changes in magnification.

I was glad I had it when a buck came trotting through an overgrown clearing at just more than 100 yards from my stand. I could have shot the deer with the scope on 2.5X, but the throw lever made going up to 8X so quick that I didn't have to.

This occurred after three days of snow, sleet and rain, and the VX-3HD weathered it all with no problems. The scope is waterproof, fog-proof and shock-proof. The one I've been testing answers adjustments precisely, and it's been right at home on .30-30 Win. and .45-70 Govt. lever actions.

The VX-3HD ranges from $499.99 to $999.99 (leupold.com), with the pricier models having features such as an illuminated reticle, side parallax adjustment knob, and yes, a 30 mm tube. The line offers a scope for just about any hunting situation, but I think I'll stick to the 2.5-8x36 mm. Did I mention it's built on a 1-inch tube?

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FEDERAL PREMIUM HAMMERDOWN

TOP-SHELF COMPONENTS CREATE EXCELLENT LOADS FOR LEVER GUNS.

By Adam Heggenstaller

To me, the lever-action rifle will always be the quintessential deer gun. Whether it's chambered for .30-30 Win., .45-70 Govt. or even .35 Rem., a lever gun belongs in the woods come deer season. I suppose those feelings come from growing up in the East and toting a Winchester Model 94 through the hardwoods and hemlocks during my formative years as a deer hunter. A lot has changed about rifles, cartridges and deer hunting since then, but the iconic lever action continues to be favored by a whole lot of hunters—and not just in the Appalachians.

Federal Premium (federalpremium.com) recognized this when, working with Henry Repeating Arms, it set out to develop a new line of ammunition specifically tailored to up the performance of lever-action rifles. The HammerDown line was announced in 2020 and has grown to include loads for not only the .30-30 Win., .35 Rem., .444 Marlin and .45-70 Govt., but also the .327 Fed. Mag., .357 Mag., .44 Mag. and .45 Colt. While these latter four may be regarded as handgun cartridges, they are also used in lever-action rifles in states that now permit hunting with straight-wall centerfire cartridges in areas previously open only to shotguns and muzzleloaders.

Ballisticians at Federal focused on several areas when developing

ADAM HEGGENSTALLER (TOP)

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HammerDown. Let's start with the bullet. All HammerDown loads feature molecularly bonded bullets, meaning the bullet's jacket is permanently adhered to its lead core. This eliminates the chance for the jacket and core to separate during impact, and it helps retain weight during penetration for deeper wound channels. Federal uses the process to make Fusion bullets, and Speer relies on it for Gold Dot bullets.

The bullets loaded in what are typically handgun cartridges are heavier than normal in the HammerDown ammo. For example, the .357 Mag. bullet weighs 170 grains instead of 158 grains, and the .44 Mag. bullet weighs 270 grains rather than 240 grains. This is a nod to the substantially higher velocities these cartridges produce in longer rifle and carbine barrels. Federal lists the velocity of the .357 Mag. HammerDown load at 1,610 fps and the velocity of the .44 Mag. load at 1,715 fps. The four rifle cartridges in the line have more conventional bullet weights and velocity ratings.

Federal loads HammerDown in nickel-plated brass cases to ward off corrosion and aid in extraction. The front face of the case's rim is chamfered for smoother cycling. The HammerDown loads, being a Federal Premium product, are loaded with Gold Medal primers. Suggested retail prices for 20 rounds are $25.99 (.45 Colt) to $65.99 (.45-70 Govt.).

I tested the 300-grain .45-70 Govt. HammerDown load, which Federal advertises as having a muzzle velocity of 1,850 fps. From a Marlin Model 1895 Guide Gun with an 18 1/2-inch barrel, the load averaged 1,983 fps when I shot it through a chronograph. Accuracy at 100 yards was excellent, as all three-shot groups were less than 1.5 inches and several crowded 1 inch.

In Ohio, I shot a nice buck with the load at a range of a little more than 100 yards. The bullet impacted the deer about halfway up the body along the rear edge of the shoulder and passed through. The deer fell and never moved another inch. While the big bullet did its job admirably, there was little undue damage to the meat surrounding the wound cavity—something that nearly always occurs with lighter, faster bullets.

Lever-action rifles simply work for whitetails. With HammerDown loads, they may even work a little better.

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- John Barsness, Rifle #311, July 2020

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1 Jar ☐ $50	1 Bottle ☐ $60	1 Bottle ☐ $75	$______
2 Jars ☐ $85	2 Bottles ☐ $100	2 Bottles ☐ $125	$______
3 Jars ☐ $100	3 Bottles ☐ $120	3 Bottles ☐ $150	$______

Total From Other Side $______
Shipping, Rush Service and Insurance $20.00 VALUE ONLY $ 14.95
Total Enclosed $______

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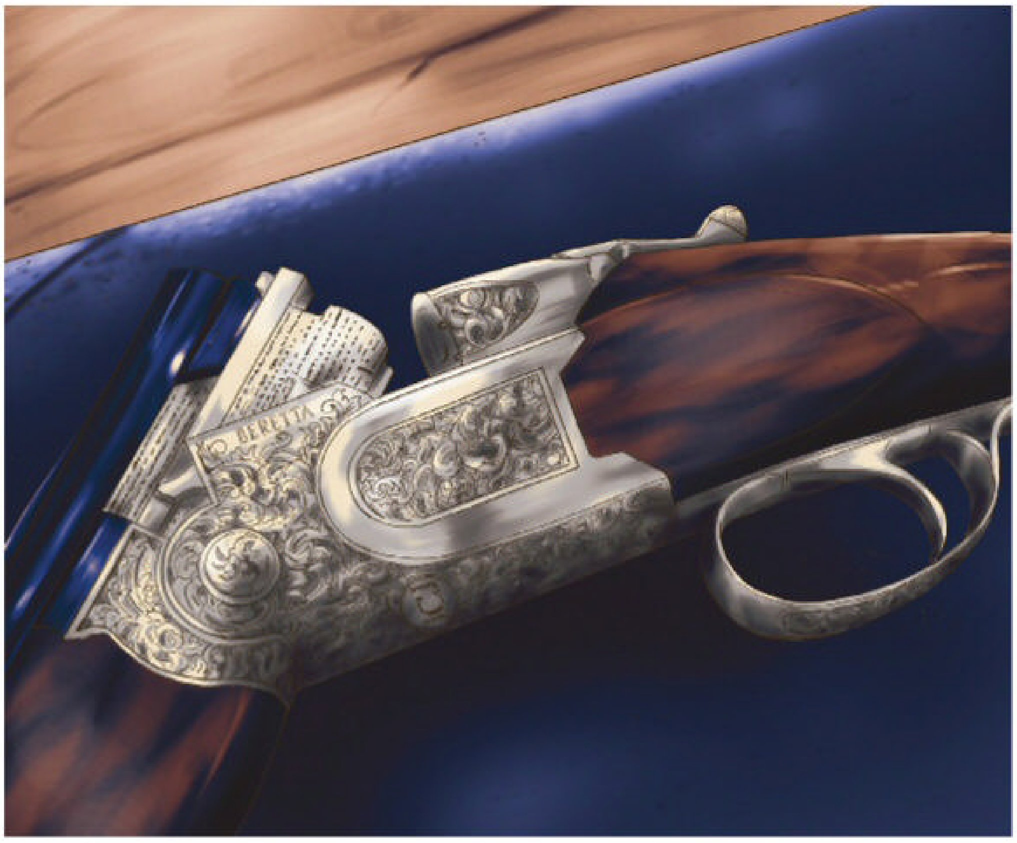
BY JEFF JOHNSTON

SKEET LESSONS

CONFIDENCE AND MANNERS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN FANCY GUNS.



DAVID HOUSTON

One Saturday Shane's buddy John Jackson invited him for a round of skeet at Oak Hill Sporting Club, where John's father was a member. Shane had never shot skeet, nor did he know his town had a "sporting club." But if it involved shooting, Shane figured it had to be fun.

When they arrived, however, Shane felt out of place. The men he saw looked like they were dressed more for business meetings than for fun. There was no camouflage anywhere. His apprehension increased as John and his father uncased their shotguns.

John's was an over-under with long, deeply blued barrels that glinted in the sun like an ocean wave. The gun's silver receiver was engraved with the word Beretta and the initials J.C.J. underneath. John broke the shotgun open and deftly balanced it on his shoulder, barrels forward so they pointed down. Mr. Jackson's shotgun had gold inlays and ornate wood with a wispy grain like smoke over a campfire. It made Shane's hand-me-down Mossberg 500 feel inadequate.

After Mr. Jackson signed in, the trio, along with an older gentleman assigned to their group, positioned themselves on station No. 1.

"Just study the birds' speed and angle, and you'll do fine," said Mr. Jackson as he stepped onto the shooter's box.

"Pull!" he growled. An orange clay disk sped across the sky before quickly disappearing in a gray puff of dust.

"Pull!" Another clay pigeon flew from the opposite direction and was promptly pulverized. The attorney-turned-shooter loaded the over-under and called again, and this time two birds flew simultaneously. Both were blasted into smithereens.

Next up was John, who hit the first three but missed the last. Then the older gentleman stepped up. Shane noticed his shotgun was even fancier than Mr. Jackson's. He dropped one bird, but Shane could tell he knew what he was doing.

It was Shane's turn. He loaded a shell in the chamber and, knowing there were four targets coming, slid three shells into the magazine.

"I meant to tell you," said Mr. Jackson politely, "but in skeet you load a maximum of two shells."

"Yessir," said Shane, embarrassed as he ejected two shells from the Mossberg. "Pull" he yelled finally, before breaking the target into pieces.

"Good shot!" said Mr. Jackson. "Now do it again."

By the time the foursome was on the last station, Shane was no longer nervous. He had hit 21 out of 23 birds thrown. John had 19, the older gentleman had 22, and Mr. Jackson was perfect.

"Wow! You haven't missed a single target yet!" blurted Shane just before Mr. Jackson called for his final bird.

"Pull!" he said, firing almost immediately, but the bird sailed away unblemished. Mr. Jackson grumbled, clearly upset.

The group took the rest of their targets, with Shane hitting the high-house bird but missing the one from the low house. As they walked to the clubhouse, Mr. Jackson complimented Shane on his shooting.

"Just think what I could do with a gun like yours," replied Shane.

At that moment the older gentleman spoke up.

"Son, can I offer you three points of advice?"

"Yessir," said Shane.

"Sometimes in sport, like in business, adversaries underestimate those who are humble, and that can give you an edge. So don't be too quick to retire that pump gun if it's working for you. Secondly, etiquette is very important. Never remind a shooter about a streak they've got going. It's poor form. And most importantly," he continued, "never drink too much coffee."

Shane furrowed an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because I can't go a full round without nature calling," said the gentleman. "So take my Perazzi here and go run 25 straight while I visit the men's room."

Shane had no choice but to accept the shotgun. He looked at John, who was chuckling.

"You know how much that thing's worth?" asked John.

"I don't wanna know," said Shane.

"Just don't drop it!" kidded John.

Shhhhh. No wake zone.

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